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A MAN OF THE DAY

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A MAN OF THE DAY.

BY THE AUTHORS OF
"DAVID ARMSTRONG."

"Is there naught better than to enjoy?
No deed which done will make time break,
Letting us pent up creatures through
Into eternity our due;
No forcing earth teach heaven's employ?"

"No wise beginning here and now,
Which cannot grow complete (earth's feat),
And heaven must finish there and then?
No tasting earth's true food for men,
Its sweet in sad, its sad in sweet?"

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



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A MAN OF THE DAY.



CHAPTER I.

A LITTLE old cottage stood out rather picturesquely against a hazy background of beech woods, just beginning to be clothed in their soft semi-transparent spring foliage. The roof of this cottage was thatched, and the thatch was almost covered with olive mosses, golden lichens, and house leek, until it formed a perfect treasure of colour to an artistic eye; the walls were rough-hewn and weather-beaten, and the diamond-shaped window panes were of that quaint greenish hue so dear to modern taste.

A bank of whins in full bloom sloped down to the river, and this river itself added the last touch of beauty to the scene, as it rippled and danced in the afternoon sunlight. Altogether, in situation and appearance the cottage looked an ideal one—on the outside! Possibly, like many of our labourers' homes of twenty years ago, it might not be so entirely satisfactory within doors.

The door stood open, and a couple of children sitting on the step were alternately laughing and crying as they lost or gained possession of the one marble which was their only plaything. It is difficult to imagine the pleasure this could give, as when won it was either simply fondled in the dirty little hands, or transferred from them to the mouth for greater security.

The room into which the door opened straight was neither pretty nor orderly.

How could it be when it had to serve alike for kitchen, scullery, nursery, and bedchamber? The hearth was unswept, and the fire burnt low; the table was littered with unwashed mugs and basins, and smeared with marks caused by childish fingers, which had amused themselves by tracing figures on its surface with the drops of broth spilt at the mid-day meal.

Where the light fell, and the air blew in from the open door, a lad of eight or nine years of age sat, nursing a cross and teething baby. He held it gently, and rocked it in his arms, even walked the floor with it now and then, as he had seen his mother do, or fed it with warmed milk; but his voice failed when he tried to sing or whistle to amuse it.

Who can wonder at that, poor little fellow? Did not the wind, and the sunshine, and the bright purling water keep

calling him out from his dreary home duties? It had never seemed so bad to bear as on that fresh, fair spring day.

Oh! but to be free to follow the windings of the river to some sweet shady nook, where he might lie and watch the speckled trout leap out of the water; or, cap in hand, chase the first white butterfly, forerunner of summer; or creep along by the hawthorn hedges, and seek out the pearly eggs or the wee nested birds!

Away in the distance he heard the joyous song of a lark. Larks had good lives of it, he thought, resentful of the fate which had given him duties to perform, and a conscience too tender to permit of him slipping them.

Alick thought of the "blackies'" nest which he had found out the day before, and meant to watch and guard until the yellow-billed fledglings were old enough to be taken from their parent

bird with safety, when he hoped his mother would let him keep one. He meant to train it to whistle tunes, like the one Tommy Spence had last year. If only one of the other lads did not find them out! At this idea suspense became all but unbearable. What would he not have given to be allowed to go at once and assure himself of the safety of his newly-discovered treasure!

What a bother babies were! And how he wished his mother would come home!

Poor mother! She was always so tired when she came back from field work; it was too bad of him to grudge a little trouble for her.

If he did feel cross sometimes at being defrauded of his life's playtime, the thought of his mother generally put him right again, and he felt sorry for rebellious thoughts then. For he was a tender-hearted little fellow, was Alick

Lisle, and more reasonable in his arguments than most boys of his age.

So, after the baby's eyes closed in the sleep against which it had struggled so obstinately, Alick laid it down on the bed, and covered up its pretty pink toes very tenderly with an old shawl of his mother's, and moving gently about, so as not to disturb its uneasy slumbers, began to make preparations for that mother's home-coming. Swept the hearth and made up the fire, set on the kettle and put things in readiness for tea as deftly as a girl.

Then, while he waited for the water to boil, he sat looking into the fire, and wondering about his lessons. After all, it wasn't the play he minded so much, if he could only get leave to go to school regularly, and study a bit at home sometimes ! There were great possibilities in that slow, plodding brain of

his, and he was beginning to awaken to their value. But he took such a lot of time to do things well, and time was very difficult to find. And then his torn and patched jacket and trousers. How was he to get clothes decent enough to go back to school in? For, truth to tell, his absence from school was a good deal his own wish. His clothes had been darned and mended until it was hard to say what the original material was; and he had grown so ashamed of them, that his mother could not get him out of the house before dusk. Maybe she did not try very hard, poor body, for there was no denying that it was a relief to know he was at home to look after the bairns, instead of her having to trust them to Nancy Pearson's careless, hare-brained lass. Neither did she see the good of "over much schoolin'" for Alick, who would only have to go after the plough, like his father before him.

But Alick was perfectly well aware of what he was losing by his absence, if his mother was not, and this was why he sat staring moodily into the fire, and wishing he was a braver lad, and did not mind the jeers and ridicule of his schoolfellows so much.

For, after all, a man who really meant to rise in the world should be able to bear a good deal of that sort of thing without wincing !



CHAPTER II.

MEANWHILE Alick's mother formed one of a group of women, who were busily engaged hoeing and weeding the promising crop in Farmer Scott's turnip field.

This group of women looked picturesque enough in the distance, with their skirts of dull brown flannel, relieved by jackets of gay coloured print, or with bright shawls knotted round them. A nearer view, however, revealed awkward ungainly figures, and faces, coarsened by exposure, or brutalized by ignorance. Their lives were hard and unlovely, and nature for the most part had adapted their souls to their surroundings. Having

for the present "meat and drink," they were content therewith.

The day was fine, and some of the workers were young, so there was no lack of talk. Many a rough—not too delicate—joke went round, followed by laughter proportioned more to the coarseness than the wit.

Mrs. Lisle took no part in the talk, however, but went ploddingly on with her work, only stopping now and then to straighten her tired limbs and aching back.

A careworn-looking woman, unnoticeable enough from the others, save perhaps from the fact that a coarse and battered bonnet, trimmed with a piece of rusty crape, took the place of the ordinary calico hood, and also perhaps for a certain dreary patience in the face. Possibly this patience was more that of animal endurance than spiritual conquest, as the sight of her suggested an

old and jaded cart-horse, sooner than a haloed martyr. This look is not uncommon in the very poor. Constant manual toil leaves little energy to fight against their lot, and little brain power left to dwell upon its justice or injustice.

That tenpence a day was all she could gain for ten hours incessant work; that patriotic overseers in their dread of encouraging pauperism, offered her a meagre pittance or the option of "the house" (the very mention of which filled her with a passionate dread, unlike any other feeling in its intensity), and that the future held for her nothing but the prospect of a living death within its walls, or still worse, a pauper burial; these were all facts to be accepted as part of the nature of things, and borne with unconscious fortitude. That they could or should be altered never as much as crossed her mind.

If such a thought *had* come indeed, it would have been banished instantly as a deadly sin. She had been taught her catechism at school, and if she ever chanced to forget her "duty towards God," at least she remembered that what she owed her neighbours was "to do her duty in the station of life to which it had pleased God to call her."

In the good old times that was the passage both parson and squire's lady thought it most important to direct the attention of their parish children to, and they were apt to treat it as though it embodied every duty of man—of poor man, at all events!

Not from his mother had Alick Lisle inherited his enthusiastic love of nature; for though the plover fluttered over the furrows, uttering its plaintive cry, and from the woods which bordered the field came a perfect chorus of melody, while

once or twice an early butterfly hovered over the rough young leaves of the turnips, sound and sight seemed alike lost on the widow. Not by song of birds, opening blossoms, or newly born butterflies, did she mark the advancing year. Change of field work formed her calendar, and the happy spring-time meant regular occupation, and summer a little more pay in hay-time and harvest.

To-day, however, there was something in the woman's mind, something of cheerfulness, even of hope. Spite of the dulled brain and slow torpid pulses, there was one great affection stirred in her still. Love of nature might not exist, love of humanity might be undreamt of, love of God might be unawakened; but a great mother-love was strong within her. Her work was sweetened by the thought of giving Alick a pleasant surprise when she got home.

She could not fail to see that the lad was unhappy; and though his hunger and thirst after knowledge was a thing she could scarcely imagine, much less understand, she yet recognized in a dim way that the unsatisfied longing was a grief to him, and she did so want him to be content and happy. She recalled, too, with a touch of pathos, that "his father always had a kind o' hankerin' after buiks."

Now he would be able to go to the school again. Had she not been promised a suit of cast-off clothes belonging to Percy, Farmer Scott's boy, and surely even Alick would be dazzled when he saw the blue jacket with its bright buttons?

When at last she reached her cottage, scant greetings passed between the mother and her children, much as she loved them. In such a hard busy life

there is sadly too little time for the sweet amenities of home, and perhaps this is why so many in that class grow up sad and stern in manner and appearance.

But when drinking the welcome cup of tea Alick had ready for her, Mrs. Lisle surprised him by beginning—

“Ye can gang to the school on Monday now, Alick, my man, for the master’s given me a decent suit for ye. It’s yonder i’ that bundle, ye can open it oot if ye like.”

At the mention of school, the boy had raised his eyes quickly, but only to turn away directly after with a disappointed expression on his face. He stood looking out of the window after that, and did not attempt to unfold the treasure his mother had brought him. Nor did he make any comment upon her speech.

“They’ve gotten’ a new master, Alick,

did ye hear that? Maybe he'll not be as fond o' the stick as auld Atkinson was."

Still no word from the lad.

"Ye'll like to gang, Alick, surely?"

Then at last Alick raised his eyes to hers, and she was astonished and not a little afraid of the expression there.

"I cannot, mother, oh, I cannot wear Percy Scott's auld claes! Him of all folks that shamed me afore the whole school. He said—he said," gasped the boy, with a great sob of agony, "as I was only fit to be set i' the fields for a boggle to fright the birds, 'stead o' comin' among respectable people. I'd rather wear my own things until they drop off me altogether, than I'd be beholden to him for a good suit."

Alick looked down on his patched and faded garments with a certain affection never felt for them before, as he said this.

Sure enough there was a dignity about them that no borrowed garb would insure! Poor as they were, they were his own, and had become stamped with his identity. But to appear in the half-worn clothes of the boy he most disliked—this would make him lose every spark of self-respect.

Of course Mrs. Lisle could not understand such fantastic scruples in the least. He was just as proud and unpractical as his father before him, she thought, with a sigh of disappointment. It was hard on her poor body, for she had meant to please.

But she dared not urge the point, for she stood not a little in awe of her eldest born. Besides, she loved him too much to hurt him wilfully. So Johnny, the younger boy, got a smart new suit, and Alick stayed at home and minded the bairns, until his mother saved sufficient to make him presentable again.

CHAPTER III.

At last old Atkinson, the schoolmaster, had gone to his reward, and there were few amongst the village lads who didn't express a certain satisfaction in the fact!

Perhaps in the minds of most there existed also an unconfessed hope that he would find it pretty hot where he went, for the remembrance of him was apt to recall a tingling sensation not provocative of charitable wishes.

He had been a staunch disciple of Solomon in the matter of not sparing the rod; but it must be confessed the amount of culture possessed by the older inhabitants of the village did not say

much for the method inculcated by the sage.

Great curiosity had been felt over the advent of a new master, and "a foreigner, too," as the old wives called him.

Their geography not extending beyond Wrekenton, the rest of the world was usually designated vaguely as "foreign parts," and looked on with distrust. Of course there was a strong prejudice against the stranger!

"Nobody kens aught about him," being a terribly condemnatory statement in the mouth of a Fordham gossip; "and then wasn't there Betty's Johnny, who was lame of a leg, and really clever at figures, who by rights of natur' should have been made a schoolmaster—and why not in his native place? But the parson was aye fond of his own way, and it was well known that Betty had never been a favourite since she had spoken up to the

parson's wife when the lady had found fault with Susan's ribbons as unbecoming!"

However, for good or evil, Donald Cameron had come, but his appearance did not disarm suspicion.

He was voted "a soft one" by the parents, and his future pupils mentally calculated the chances of surreptitious feastings on unripe gooseberries and apples, and games at marbles within the sacred precincts; having a faint hope that much would pass unobserved under the new reign that had been wont to bring down quick and heavy punishment under the old.

On the surface such a judgment was not to be wondered at, for the dark eyes of the new master were mild, dreamy, undefined, even the colour was not easily determined upon, or seemed to vary, while a slight droop at the corners of the



mouth added an expression of melancholy to his face.

This perhaps told against him more than anything, for the vulgar are invariably repelled by a face where either thought or feeling is visible, and see no beauty in the hieroglyphic writing which possesses so much interest to a cultured eye. "Looks as if he had something on his mind," generally implies strong conviction that all is not as it should be, and hints wonderful possibilities in the way of hidden crime.

Donald Cameron was happily ignorant of the feeling against him; in fact, the past and the future were too interesting to leave him any great thought for the present, and the written words of the mighty dead too full of wisdom to leave any leisure for listening to the foolish words of the living.

Almost self-taught, he had pored over

books till he had grown blind to the everyday world around him ; and though nature still had power to awaken his interest, he cared more for what poets had written of her than for the goddess herself ; and as for human nature, though it was absorbingly interesting in books, it really was fearfully humdrum now-a-days.

He supposed the great men of old must have been boys some time or other ; but the boys of the present seemed to him very little likely to become anything but the most ordinary of mortals.

He had lived so lonely a life that he had lost the way of getting *en rapport* with men of his own class ; and as for the women, he was always comparing them—when he became conscious of their existence—with that bright poetic ideal maiden to whom he was in the habit of penning innumerable poems, and then

burying them in the heavy old brass-bound writing-desk that was one of his few treasures.

It might be that this maiden had existence other than in the fancy of Donald Cameron, and that in some happier time he had dreamt even of winning her; some of his verses seemed to hint of renunciation and of pain; but, however that might be, certain it is, that now her light no longer cheered his path; for, as the village postmistress soon circulated, there were few letters came to the lonely man, and these few were unmistakably business ones.

What design could fate or providence have in bringing such a man to Fordham, to be stared at by the rustics, and to teach the rudiments of learning to a lot of uncouth little urchins? Who knows? And yet there is surely often a prophecy in life, and a dim presentiment

came to Cameron one day, soon after his arrival, of the influence he might become in the development of at least one soul in the place.

As often happened, he had forgotten the capacities of his audience, and being carried away by the history lesson, had grown eloquent over the struggle for truth and liberty fought by the heroic bishops against the persecutions of James II. His words grew more and more glowing as he dwelt on the enthusiasm of the lower classes for the cause of right.

With all his bookishness, the school-master was still a man of the people, and the blood of his race asserted itself at times, and brought him in sympathy with the class; though alas! he seldom found himself so with any individual of it; and now he wound up with a really fine peroration on the popular judgment.

Vox populi, vox Dei, is a hackneyed

enough quotation, but the English version of it came to one boy there as an inspiration ; and as Donald Cameron, awakening suddenly to the present, looked round, he met one pair of eyes fixed on him with a look of the intensest interest ; while their owner, who was not in the class, but supposed to be busy with vulgar fractions, had laid down his slate, and, with elbows on the desk and chin propped on his hands, had forgotten everything in the new ideal suggested to him. The moment, however, he found himself observed, the lad blushed crimson, and returned to his work, ashamed of his enthusiasm, not of his idleness ; and the young master found himself thinking more of Alick Lisle than he had done of any living soul for many a day. As for Alick, his slow but busy brain had got hold of a problem ; how to harmonize his mother's respect for the powers that

be, with the struggle against such powers in the past; a struggle he instinctively felt to have been righteous.

To Alick the past could simply be interesting in its connection with the present, or for the light it threw on the future.

He was only a boy, with all a boy's eagerness to realize theory into fact; and for days after he used to wonder how a man with such thoughts in his brain as the schoolmaster had, could sit quietly, apparently content to let things rest. Rest in all their meanness, their injustice, and their unrighteousness.

CHAPTER IV.

PERHAPS it is as well not to attempt any definition of the views held by the people of Fordham as to social position and what constitutes it.

A volume might easily be written on the subject; but whether, after being written, it could be read, is a different question.

Suffice it that the inhabitants themselves were perfectly sure of their respective castes, and, as a rule, dreamt no more of changing them than if they had been born in India instead of England.

Even the very church on a Sunday was a protest against any radical individual,

who dared to think of equality within its walls. From the big square pew of the squire, which faced the pulpit, attention was shown to precedence. Did not the parson's family rank next, and then the doctor's; after him, the schoolmaster, in due order, then the village grocer and butcher, and after them the rank and file.

Wealthy and prosperous Farmer Scott, or "the Laird," as he was sometimes called, who owned the land he tilled, and was known to have a snug little fortune besides, had a good substantial family pew under the old gallery. His situation there showed the footing he was on in the little village world.

He might have ranked next the Squire had he not refused to do so. Whether this arose from pride or the natural tendency of a man who has had trouble, and shrinks from intercourse with those

whose position could warrant them in offering either sympathy or advice, is not known.

As regarded the externals of his life, he seemed to assimilate them to those of the humbler class of tenant farmers in the neighbourhood; but even some of the latter found ambition enough to wish a different future for their children, and scraped and saved to send them to be educated at a distance, where better advantages could be obtained. Mr. Scott, however, found the village school good enough for his boy and girl, Percy and Nelly; both of whom were likewise to be brought up to work as hard and live as frugally as the children of his own hinds and labourers.

Poor little Nelly Scott therefore made her first appearance at school on the day when Alick Lisle returned to it, after his enforced absence.

The dainty rosy-cheeked maiden at once seemed to take the position of a miniature queen amongst the other children; as much owing to a certain pretty wilfulness, as to the fact that she was better dressed than the most of them, and that Mr. Scott was rich.

That their being there was owing to a mere whim on the part of their father, and not due to any idea of social equality, Master Percy had taken pains enough to explain; and the lad's assumption of superiority was received well enough by his schoolmates, with the exception of Alick Lisle, on whom alone it grated.

"We pay our twopence a week as well as him, so whatfore should he set hisself up as better than us? The master says it's brains and perseverance raises a man in the end; and if so, the time may come when one'll be able to look down on him for all his airs." And Alick threw back

his head, and set his mouth proudly, as he recalled how he had left Percy behind in arithmetic and geography.

Percy was no favourite with the schoolmaster, for, though a clever boy, he was too indolent to learn his lessons, and too proud to be amenable to discipline; and the fact of his superior position, which Percy thought ought to win him favour, was rather against him than otherwise in the eyes of the discontented and radically inclined schoolmaster.

In fact, Cameron enjoyed seeing Alick Lisle, slow but sure, gradually distance the other boy; who depended entirely on his splendid memory, and never took the trouble to thoroughly master anything. This could not but create a sore feeling between the lads; for Percy, of course, saw and resented the favouritism shown to his rival.

It was not in the schoolroom only that

the rivalry existed; for while Percy's slight, lithe figure gave him the advantage in all games of leaping and running, wherever strength or pluck was needed Alick came off victor. One day the sight of Alick wrestling with big Tom Johnson, the scientific manner in which he threw him, and the cheers the boys gave the conqueror, roused a jealous anger in Percy's heart; who had neither strength nor courage for such encounters himself.

When immediately afterwards they commenced playing marbles, he determined he would beat, at any rate, in that; but Alick's sure eye and steady aim made this more difficult than he had fancied.

Some slight accident having occurred in another part of the playground, the boys turned for a moment from watching the game, and Alick turned with them; then, to the horror of Nelly, who was looking on, Percy glanced furtively

round, and placed one of the marbles more to his own advantage.

Nelly's lips opened with a gasp. A child's keen sense of justice made her long to cry out, but a threatening look from Percy silenced her.

Alick scratched his head with a puzzled air; he did not understand it at all. "I do believe you have been cheating, Percy Scott," he said, slowly. "Where's the good, if you won't play fair?"

"What do you mean?" asked the other, angrily, a crimson flush mounting to his forehead, and his eyes falling before Alick's searching, steadfast gaze.

"I mean you couldn't have hit it, if your taw had been where I saw it last."

Percy's guilty looks condemned him. "How dare you say so? How dare you accuse *me* of cheating?"

"And why not you as well as anybody

else, pray?" asked Alick, with aggravating coolness.

"What's the row?" cried several of the other boys, overhearing the raised and indignant voices, and flocking near with the expectant eagerness visible in boys who scent a fight.

"My gentleman here is a cheat as well as a molly-coddle, that's all."

"It's a lie, a beastly lie!" screamed Percy, with whom passion had now completely mastered conscience.

"Percy, Percy, how can you?" cried Nelly, who could no longer hold her tongue. "You know that you did it, and that I saw you, too, and I won't help you to be deceitful—*there!*"

"That's a brave lassie," said Alick, turning admiringly towards the little creature, who stood all panting and glowing in her eager defence of justice. She loved Percy, but she loved truth more.

But it did not follow that she would make common cause with his enemy, simply because she was determined her brother should not do wrong if she could help it; and when Alick went on giving Percy a little of his mind, the child turned upon him at last.

“You’re nearly as much to blame as he is. What did you aggravate him for?” With her sex’s inconsistency, she forgot that the aggravation only came after the offence was committed. “And everybody knows he would have had the first place in the cyphering class, if the master hadn’t helped *you*.”

Alick’s indignant denial led to more rough words; and Percy’s blood was up at last, so that even he no longer shunned a fight.

When Nelly saw the effect of her words, she burst out crying, and clung to Percy’s arm.

Throwing her aside, "Come on, Alick Lisle, and let's see who is the best man after all," he cried; and the lads delightedly made a ring round the pair.

But, to the surprise of all, Alick hung back. His clear brain had been weighing the results of such an encounter. He knew he could lick Percy easily enough; in fact, he wasn't sure that it wouldn't be cowardly to fight in so unequal a battle.

"He's just like a girl," thought he, with a glance of contempt at the white hands and the quivering lips of his antagonist. But this was not what weighed with him most, for, after all, a licking might do Master Percy good, and take some of the nonsense out of him. But here was the rub. How would Farmer Scott take it? How would he like to see his boy come home with his pretty face swollen and discoloured? And this, too, by the son of a woman who got her bread

and that of her children by working for him! How could he thrash the child of the man on whom his mother was dependent, and the man, too, who had done them many a kindly turn, even if not always in the most delicate way?

"He dare not fight you, Percy!" cried Nelly, joyously, clapping her hands in her excitement; and the others hissed and cried shame, as Alick, turning very pale and plunging his hands in his pockets, walked slowly to the end of the playground.

And yet somehow the conviction that this was something different from mere cowardice, stole in upon the minds of the boys; for, after a moment, their jeering cries ceased, and none of them ventured to intrude on Alick's solitude.

When the school-bell rang again, the boy, starting from an attitude of intense dejection, sighed wearily as he thought of facing his comrades again.

“It was hard to bide, hard to bide, mother, but I’d do it again for your sake—yours and the little uns!” and off he trudged, manfully to struggle with tasks, which for that day, at least, had lost all interest.

CHAPTER V.

"ALICK, Alick, wait for me!" cried a young and eager voice, as Alick Lisle was creeping along by a hedge-side, one bright morning in early summer, when everything invited boys who were wickedly disposed, to "play truant." And Alick, who had his fits of wickedness, like all the rest of the world, was that sunny day ready for anything rather than the dull plodding routine of school.

His brain was as yet slow at learning from books, and except when specially interested, worked doggedly rather than brilliantly; in fact, it was at a stage

which may be described in one word—receptive.

Intensely receptive it was, however, and in Nature's book few could beat Alick for knowledge. He knew the habits and the haunts of every living creature within miles of his home; knew when the first butterfly was likely to be seen, and the last swallow; where the biggest brood of young owls lay hidden in the hollow ivy-clad tree; and could have written a natural history of the neighbourhood, which would, at least, have had the merit of being thoroughly reliable.

At times a craving for freedom and solitude, for a day in the open air, watching and becoming familiar with birds, beasts, and flowers, got the better of his usual steady common sense, and then he was invariably missing till nightfall; when he would come slinking in, tired and ashamed, with a handkerchief full of

blackberries, mushrooms, or alas ! sometimes a young rabbit or hare, killed by a stone, or a few trout from one of the burns.

Mrs. Lisle did not refuse to cook these ill-gotten dainties for his and her own supper, although she preached many a homily on the sin of being found out.

At least that is the way Alick put it ; but then he was a trifle dull and stupid, and never through life could master the subtleties by which so many good folks adjust matters between their consciences and their self-interest. In this case, however, his conscience was untroubled, as already he had somewhat socialistic ideas on the subject of wild creatures, and could not bring his mind to grasp any other notion than that they of right belonged to him who had strength or cunning enough for their capture.

Nevertheless, he took good care that

neither of his little brothers ever joined him in any of these unlawful expeditions.

Perhaps this was why he went off so cautiously, and halted all unwilling when Nelly Scott hailed him. At all events it was no recollection of their quarrel in the playground, for Nelly and he had soon made friends after that, and the lad had even partly explained to the child the reason of his reluctance to fight. Somehow he could not bear that *she* should think him a coward ; as for the others it seemed to matter less. In spite of that, however, his tones were not specially gracious as he called back to her.

“What is it, Miss Nelly? Don’t stop me, there’s a good girl! I’m in a hurry.”

Nelly laughed, and hastened up to him.

“Hurry! I dare say, Alick. But look here, you’ve got to take me with you, or—I’ll tell!”

“Tell what?” said Alick, half-sulkily.
“You can’t tell nothin’ about me, ’cause ye don’t know anythin’!”

“Can’t I, though? I know you are going to play truant, there! You can’t deny that, and if I run back to your mother, she’ll stop you! But I don’t mean to do that, Alick, for if I had, I’d have done it before; because I’ve been watching you ever so long, and I mean you to take me with you! Do, Alick, dear Alick! Percy never is good to me, never takes me anywhere, and I’m so dull—so dull!”

“But I daren’t, Miss Nelly, I daren’t, indeed! Think what the schoolmaster will say, and your father—if they find out?”

“But they won’t find out! They can’t—because father has gone to Brent-ham to buy some young beasts, and won’t be home till ever so late; and Mrs.

Brown is busy, ever so busy! So I've got all the day to myself, for Percy's gone with father!"

Alick still looked doubtful.

"You can't walk so far," he said, looking at her smart little boots.

It was too bad! He wanted a day of freedom, a regular boy's day, and here was this tiresome little mischief-maker prepared to thwart all his plans, unless he would burden himself with her silly, weak, wee self! Girls were a nuisance—he wondered whatever they were made for?

But he was good-natured, and Nelly's tearful eyes and pouting lips, had some effect on his resolutions—especially when backed by an enormous jam pasty, which the little damsel had surreptitiously removed from the pantry, and carried with her in triumph.

It ended, as usual, by feminine persis-

tency overcoming masculine determination; and they set off at last together amicably enough.

They passed along the river-side, and watched the swallows skimming the surface of the water. How quickly they flew down and up again, touching the water with their breasts, and what graceful curves they described in their rapid flights!

Then the children took an upland path, which led far away over the hills, the hills that sentinel round the basin where the Wythe flows. As they gradually mounted, the tops of the woods lay below, lightly clad in their early summer greenery; and through them the river showed here and there, glittering under the morning sunshine, as it flowed on clear and unpolluted over its pebbles.

The air blew fresh from the moorlands, when they rested by the side of a burn

that came leaping down from the hills, eager to lose its identity in the broad river; somewhat as a young impetuous soul pines to lose itself in the strong stream of human life and action.

Alick proposed that they should follow this burn to its source; up past the slopes clad with gorse and heather, to the reedy marshes where it rose. Pretty little white-tailed rabbits popped in and out of the whins, much to Nelly's delight, and Alick's, too, for that matter, though he could not resist throwing a futile, half-aimless stick or stone at them, now and again; and longed, with a deep unspoken longing, to come up here some day in the gloaming, and set a few wires in that cunning way Tom Reid, the ploughman, had shown him once, under a pledge of the deepest secrecy.

The whins were in full bloom—a glorious sight! Long stretches of bur-

nished gold, broken only by the warm brown of the heather patches, or the great boulders of bluish grey stone, cropping out of the hill-side here and there.

A stray white butterfly fluttered lazily over the waves of bloom, and the bees kept up a ceaseless musical murmur. The almond-like waxy scent of the whins was almost overpowering at times, when the sun brought it out of the flowers.

Presently the ground grew level, a few stunted wind-torn trees were seen, and in a little hollow the burn was dammed back with stones, and formed a pool.

Flags and tall waving grasses fringed it on one side; opposite, dwarf but sturdy willows hung their branches over the water.

With a cry of delight, Nelly rushed to the water's edge, never heeding the fact

that the soft, boggy ground gave way under her feet; and that she was over the shoe tops in mud directly.

“Stop, Nelly, or you’ll fall in, for certain!” cried Alick, pulling her back with difficulty. “If you’ll only be a good girl, and not rush into the water like that, I’ll find you a nice dry place to sit, and then you can watch *me* comfortably,” he added, with a boy’s naïve egotism. “Nelly, I’ve got a grand idea! This is the very place for big trout, and I mean to try for some—just see if I don’t!”

They went slowly round the pool, when whew! splash, splash, cluck, cluck, and off flew a water-hen with a great whirring noise and cry.

Alick looked carefully, and behold, there was her nest hidden under the roots of a big willow, amongst the rushes which grew out of the water. There

were four eggs in it, but Alick, with great forbearance, did not touch them. Perhaps he knew it was too near hatching time for them to be of any use.

By this time the youngsters were very hungry, so they sat down on a great moss-gemmed boulder, and solemnly divided the huge jam pasty between them.

Surely never food tasted sweeter than did that stolen dainty; albeit, its crust was certainly not less than an inch thick, and inclined to be leathery, and nearly all the juice had run out in the baking. Never mind! The young healthy appetites made it a delicious meal, washed down, as it was, by a draught of clear spring water they went higher up the stream to procure; and drank with great difficulty from the palms of their hands, held cupwise.

“How nice it is to be here, Alick, and how good you are to share the fun with

me!" cried Nelly, in high glee. "Alick, when we grow up we'll come here every day, and eat jam pasty, and fish for trout, won't we, now?"

Alick laughed, but said nothing. He knew better than that, young as he was! His life was not idyllic, whatever Nelly's might be. But in the mean time it was pleasant to hear all this, and he wouldn't stop the dear little girl talking.

"How wild Percy would be if he knew what good times we are having! Nasty selfish thing he is—never lets me go with him anywhere, although I gave all the money I had saved up to take us to the wild-beast show last week, when it was at Brentham; and there, if he didn't give the last penny for a ride on the elephant's back, when he knew I wanted one so badly, and it was *my* money! and he shoved me close to the wires where the monkeys were, when I said I'd tell

father, and one of them tore the feather out of my best hat, and made me cry ! I like you better, oh, a thousand million times better than him, Alick ! Don't you like me best of all, Alick ? ”

“ No,” said the boy, coolly ; “ I like mother best, of course ! ”

Nelly pouted. Mrs. Lisle, that dowdy, common, ugly woman, to be preferred to her pretty self ! It was too bad of Alick ! But after a minute or two she reflected that it was considered the right thing to say, and that it, perhaps, was not *quite* the truth after all !

So she came out of her sulks, being of too sunny a temper to bear malice long.

Then she watched Alick's proceedings with intense interest. He lay down full length on the grass, and in this position dragged himself close to the edge of a hole, where, under a big stone, he

fancied it probable that a lazy fat trout lay hidden.

He took care not to project himself too far over the edge, lest he should throw any shadow on the pool.

Baring his arm, he slid it cautiously under water, without making the slightest noise, then felt about for a fish. Coming upon one, he commenced to tickle it, rubbing it gently to and fro with his hand.

There seems to be some mesmeric power in this, for it scarcely ever startles or moves a fish, except that the creature rises a little in the water, thus allowing the fisher to get a firmer grasp of it by the gills.

Then a quick jerk and the fish is landed, unless indeed, as Alick found a few times, it is too wary, and slipping its shiny body through the fingers, glides away to safer waters.

Spite of the ones which escaped, how-

ever, Alick managed to land about half a dozen silvery spotted beauties, to the great delight of Nelly, who could not admire them sufficiently, as they lay on the grassy bank.

Tiring at length of this, she gathered marsh marigolds, huge globes of gold, and wove them into a wreath for her nut-brown hair.

Very bright and sweet looked the round laughing face thus encircled with a diadem, the brilliance of which would have put to shame any beauty less fresh than its own.

She lay back upon the grass, and the rippling murmur of the burn as it passed on its way from the quiet pool, lulled her into a happy dreamless sleep; from which, however, she awakened a little cross and "contrary," as Alick said when, tired of his sport, he came to rest and count and gloat over his treasures.

In the long summer twilight the children crept home; and luckily for Mrs. Brown's peace of mind she didn't discover what Nelly had been after, until the next morning disclosed the state of that young lady's shoes. They were cut in three places in the upper part, and soaked through, besides being coated with a thick covering of green slime, that declined to come off at any price. But Nelly, on being questioned, refused to give any satisfactory account of herself; and Mrs. Brown, to her further amazement, discovered under the child's pillow three small trout and a perch, which she had been so delighted with that she had taken them to bed with her, and then utterly forgotten next morning.

But Mr. Scott was a man who inspired the greatest awe in all the people under him, and so Mrs. Brown was afraid to tell him of his little daughter's delin-

quencies. Probably she herself would have been blamed, for not keeping the child under her own eye, and who could be bothered with a teasing, restless sprite like that, when as busy as it was possible to be ?

So Nelly's wrong-doing was condoned, though she was looked after a little more sharply in future, lest the offence should be repeated.

But between Alick and Nelly there existed a warmer friendship from that time forth.

They had found out that they both cared for the same sort of things ; that each could supply what the other lacked.

Alick brought all his new discoveries for Nelly to see, and his dearest secrets were told to her ; and the little girl lent him books. Fairy tales principally, and these it must be confessed the boy did not very highly appreciate, though they

insensibly fed his imagination ; but there were a few natural history ones in the old-fashioned book-case at the farm, and these were a never-failing delight to him. Then Nelly was always ready to make a hero of him, and boylike, he enjoyed her admiration of his daring adventures in pursuit of curiosities in the way of birds' eggs or rare plants. Adventures which lost nothing in the narrating, for Alick was proud of them, and had the knack of graphic description, and once sure of a sympathetic audience, quite forgot his usual silence and reserve.

CHAPTER VI.

As time went on Alick made steady if not rapid progress at school, and the master grew more and more interested in his promising pupil.

This made it exceedingly annoying, when after an exceptionally hard winter, Mrs. Lisle found it necessary to accept Farmer Dobson's offer of three shillings a week for Alick's services in herding his cattle during the mornings, and frightening the crows from his seed-corn for the rest of the day.

It was pleasant enough to the lad to be out in the open air, instead of being shut up in a close school-room all the

day long; even though the east winds were keen and cutting throughout that hard bleak spring, and insufficient food and clothing did not help him to resist their effects.

But there was no way for Alick to better himself save by book-learning, he saw this plainly; and leaving school so early seemed to him to be relinquishing any hope of it.

He was thinking of it all very discontentedly as he whirled round his clapper, making a noise worse even than the harsh cries of the crows themselves. But the influences of the fitful gleams of cold and wintry sunshine, the fresh air impregnated with a healthy earthy scent from the furrows, where the green blades of young corn were springing, all the sights and sounds of nature around, told upon his fretful mood. Above all, the queer, comical movements of the flocks

of crows, amused and diverted him from his own troubles. Sometimes he felt tempted to allow them to settle on a ridge, just that he might watch their knowing manœuvres. Happily, however, for the farmer, his sense of duty generally got the better of his naturalistic instincts, and he would end by a more than usually vigorous application of his clapper.

The crows didn't care a bit for the scarecrow or "boggle" which was set up in state in the middle of the field. It had been there so long that its terrors had completely vanished. The familiarity with which they regarded it had bred inevitable contempt.

No crow of experience could be expected to be deceived by such a harmless imposition as that !

The irreverent wind had shown no respect for a hat which was once glossily conspicuous, as its owner went

decorously to meeting, but had tilted it on one side in the most shameless manner—perhaps because it had grown old and shabby before the scarecrow got it. Then the arms—outspread as in the attitude of benediction, and clad in a once eminently respectable frock-coat, now torn and threadbare—were not as imposing as they might have been, perhaps by reason of their thinness. Altogether, with the ragged old flannel petticoat which completed its nondescript garb, the poor “boggle” formed an object more ludicrous than awe-inspiring.

So thought the crows apparently, for they made it a rendezvous where they held their parliament, with as much chattering and squabbling, and with results as meagre to the observer, as is the way of parliaments in general.

The ridicule with which they treated that poor, silly, defenceless thing, was a

rather humorous commentary on the way that time-honoured illusions have ceased to affect the nerves of the enlightened intellects of the nineteenth century.

They flew round it, croaking mockingly, and when quite sure it could not retaliate, one of them even ventured to alight on its lanky arm, and peer in the most impudent manner under its hat brim. Immediately after, this daring inquirer proclaimed the fact that a vacuum existed there, with a shriek of derision, followed instantly by a chorus of delighted merri-ment from the rest.

That March day Alick Lisle seemed to feel the cold even more keenly than usual. His scanty breakfast had consisted of cold potatoes and skim milk, and since then he had eaten nothing but a crust of brown bread and a rind of cheese.

He was at the age when a boy, if well

fed, grows rapidly ; but Alick was rather stunted than otherwise. Poor fellow, although his health did not appear to suffer, he knew that he was growing dull and stupid, and that his mind refused to take the same interest in the books he tried conscientiously to study in the evenings. Cameron, the schoolmaster, had urged him to this ; but how was he to be interested deeply when circles and angles blended together before his weary eyes, and he fell asleep sooner or later over the problem he was trying to master ?

Then, too, until the children were in bed there was no chance of quiet ; and after that, his mother was apt to complain if he gave his attention to anything but her own querulous summary of the day's hardships and troubles.

It was not an encouraging prospect, he thought a little bitterly, as he trudged

away homeward after his release from work on that March day before mentioned. The cutting wind was driving the dust into his face, and perhaps this was the reason Alick rubbed the sleeve of his coat across his eyes so frequently. At any rate, he would not confess, even to himself, that it was because there were tears in them!

It was almost dark when he reached home, but on opening the door, the hungry, shivering lad was dismayed by seeing no preparations for the supper he felt so much in need of.

His mother and the younger children were gathered round a bright fire, all talking eagerly at once. His entrance was greeted with a shout.

“Ay, it’s oor Alick, mother; I was sure it was! What’ll he say when ye tell him?” and Johnny danced round his bigger brother in a gleeful excited way.

Alick looked at his mother in surprise. There was a smile lurking in her eyes and the corners of her mouth, in spite of all her vain endeavours to compose her face into the expression of solemnity she fancied befitted the occasion.

“Your uncle Joseph’s dead, and I ha’ just gettin’ the news!” she said, slowly, “and very hard it is on him, poor man, just when he’d moved into a new shop, and was doin’ so well!”

But Johnny was not to be betrayed into any show of grief, by pathos.

“Never mind that, Alick,” he shouted, “for he’s left us all his money, and mother says ye needn’t leave the schule now!” and the little fellow laid his arm, in its poor ragged sleeve, lovingly round Alick’s neck. Alick was Johnny’s hero, and he made haste to give the news that he knew would please most.

“And Maggy and me’s to have new

clothes, and go to the Sunday schule again," cried Dick; "and we must go soon too, for parson said if we didn't attend reg'lar afore Easter, we wouldn't be axed to the tea!"

Dick was the practical one, and his mind ran more on the buns and spice-loaves than was perhaps befitting an ardent Sunday scholar. He thought his religion would be all the better for an immediate reward, as well as a remote one.

"And mudder's doin' to buy me a bigger doll than Bessie Pearson's dot; with redder cheeks and turly hair, and eyes that open and shut!" and wee Maggie clasped her hands in a breathless rapture of anticipation.

"Whisht, whisht, ye bad bairns," broke in the horrified mother, holding up her hands in reprobation; "don't ye know enough to tell ye that such-like talk's not

decent, with the poor man hardly cold in his coffin yet?" Mrs. Lisle made a feint of wiping her eyes on the corner of her apron here; then she looked at her eldest boy apologetically.

"But they're not so much to blame, after all, Alick, are they, since none on them can mind him but you?"

"Eh, mother! You were nobbut sayin' yersel' that ye'd get them tea-trays now, wi' the bonny birds and posies painted on them, the ones old Riddell wouldn't let ye ha' on trust!"

It was too hard on Mrs. Lisle that her pretty little pretence of decorum should be demolished in this rough manner. That boy Dick was much too sharp, there was no denying it!

In fact, now she came to think of it, it was high time they were all in bed.

Dear, dear, and Alick hadn't had any supper yet! To think she should have



forgotten ! Why the poor boy must be fair starved wi' hunger !

"Is it true, mother ? " asked Alick in a low voice, when she rose to busy herself in preparing his neglected meal.

"Ay, ay, Alick, lad, true as gospel," she answered, pausing with the frying-pan in her hand. The first signs of prosperity appeared in that pan, in the shape of sundry rashers of bacon cut with a liberal hand.

"And a very good thing it is, they tell me—full fifty pounds a year. What d'ye think o' that now ? " Then as she looked at the eager excited group of children around her, her careworn face glowed with maternal pride. "Who would ha' guessed it ? To think o' us comin' into such a fortune. I'll be able to do the right thing by ma canny bairns at last ! "

"Ye often laugh at me for what ye

call auld wives' notions, Alick," she said, turning the frizzling bacon in the pan, and nodding her head sagely, "but what did I tell Nancy Pearson only this morn o' morns? To dream o' Farmer Dobson's big muck heap three nights runnin' as I did must mean somethin' more than ordinary! Everybody knows that muck means money, and so I wasn't hardly taken aback when the news came."

After the children were all safely tucked up in bed beside the youngest one, Alick and his mother sat up a long time, talking of this wonderful windfall.

"Yer father, poor man, wasn't so much to blame, after all, Alick, though he had a proud stomach for favours, and carried his head a bit higher than his neebors, for ye see he came o' monied folk, and couldn't help bein' a bit uplifted! Ye're yer father's own bairn i' that too, Alick,

and many and many a time have I fretted mysel' over it! But it makes little odds now, for ye'll be able to pay your own way!"

Alick was not so excited over it as the good woman his mother, but he saw the benefit quite as plainly.

"It's a good job, anyway," he remarked soberly, "for I dinna ken how we'd ha' got through another such winter."

But Mrs. Lisle was not listening to him; at that time her head was too full of her own thoughts. Her mind roamed alternately between blissful anticipations of the future, and painful recollections of the past.

"Ay, ay, he would ha' been prood, poor man, if he'd lived to see this day—yer father, I mean—terrible prood he'd ha' been! Not but what it was a blessin' the Lord took him when He did, as

things turned out; for ye mind the winter after he died, Alick, the winter afore this, how the water came through that hole i' the roof auld Dobson wouldn't mend for us, and how it well nigh drooned out the bed where he used to lie! How ever would he ha' gotten over it wi' such a cough as he had? I often wonder mysel', but ye see how things are managed for the best, when one comes to think afterwards!"

Next morning Alick had to rise before daylight, and set off to work out his week with Farmer Dobson; but his feelings were very different.

The old day-dreams had returned again, but brighter now that there was some distant chance of their realization. The lad had sufficient faith in himself to be pretty sure that with a fair start, he could reach the goal he had set before him.

His mother and the little ones were provided for, in a manner that seemed amply sufficient to their humble ideas. It would not be so selfish now to take thought of his own ambitions! Herding cows and scaring crows would not content him long, he knew that! The wind that day, as it blew freshly from the distant hills, brought with it thoughts of the world which lay beyond them. A world where a man could surely find work more suited to him and more worthy to be done, and higher rewards for the doing of it!

CHAPTER VII.

THE weeks rolled on, bringing Easter ever nearer, and with it the school treat ; although to little Dick's eager and expectant mind, the time seemed to drag very heavily.

His new suit was bought and worn, and his attendance on Sundays had been regular enough to warrant him in counting upon an invitation.

Mrs. Lisle was now owner of the set of brightly-coloured japanned tea-trays, upon which her heart had been so long set ; and they shone resplendent on the top of her best mahogany chest of drawers, along with the china shepherd



and shepherdess inherited from her maternal grandmother.

Nancy Pearson's two pictures, representing respectively "Abraham's Sacrifice," and "The Finding of Moses," no longer aggravated Mrs. Lisle, when she ran in to pay a neighbourly visit. Even the splendours of Abraham's yellow and purple robe, and the gorgeous modernized apparel of Pharaoh's daughter, were eclipsed by the tulips and red and green parrots of her own new purchase.

When Nancy therefore came in to pay a visit of condolence, Mrs. Lisle's mind was at ease. She had sufficient self-restraint not to point out these art treasures; showing in this, by the way, more good breeding than the most of modern *bric-à-brac* hunters—but sat smoothing down the folds of her crape-trimmed gown; with a face, the gravity of which came easily from a serene con-

sciousness of the dignity of her position. Brothers-in-law died every day, but they hadn't all a thousand pounds to leave behind them !

Nancy Pearson's manner, however, showed that she was not without a due appreciation of the fact ; and Mrs. Lisle, recognizing this, at once felt satisfied, and condescended to talk things over in a friendly way with her old neighbour.

"It's a beautiful quality," said Nancy, admiringly, after she had been invited to feel the texture of Mrs. Lisle's gown, and held it between her finger and thumb critically, "and crape folds on the skirt, too !"

"I thought it only my duty, considerin' everything !" answered the mourner, with a melancholy satisfaction in her voice, "one wouldn't ha' grudged it for one's own flesh and blood, and after all he's left none of his own to do it for him, if we didn't !"

The Easter tea went off with great success, when at length the time for it arrived; and the good things provided seemed to disappear as if by magic before the healthy appetites of the children.

It was a solemn business that tea, and gone through in solemn silence.

If a visitor new to the usages of the occasion tried to break the monotony by venturing on a joke, he or she was regarded with pathetic reproach by the youngsters. It was so much time taken from the buns and plum-cake they were there to eat, and they meant to fulfil their mission !

As for laughing, there would be plenty of time for that in the evening, when the entertainment began. That entertainment which was looked forward to with such careless pleasure by the children, but which had caused the rector and his helpers no end of anxiety.

“Alick Lisle, you are to sit next me!” said Nelly Scott, who was looking like a pretty little fairy, in a dainty straw hat with a wreath of pink and white daisies, her cheek flushed, and her eyes dancing with excitement.

Alick was there rather against his will; for he had already begun to develop “queer notions,” as his mother called them, and to question, “what was the good of a big boy like him going to Sunday school, where they didn’t tell you anything but what you knew afore?”

He was content enough, however, to sit next Nelly Scott, with little Dick at his other side, and wee Maggie on his knee. As for Johnny, being a youth of an inquiring turn of mind, he had chosen to get as near the front as possible, so that he might see how the magic lantern, which was the great feature of the evening, was worked.

After the children were seated, some of the older inhabitants of the village were allowed to come in, and the schoolroom was soon crowded to suffocation.

Donald Cameron stopped a moment as he made his way towards the platform—where he was to explain the views, while the rector showed the lantern—and said a kindly word or two to Alick, and then patting Maggie gently on the shoulder, made a pretence of non-recognition of the little face smiling up at him.

“And who is this wee lassie? It can’t be Maggie, surely?” he asked, and passed on to his place. He had forgotten all about the child, when a tiny hand was laid on his knee, and looking down, he saw her with a most earnest expression in the round blue eyes that regarded him wistfully.

“Please, sir, I *is* Maggie, but I’ve

getten a new frock, and mother has curled my hair up ! ”

The little maid had not been able to bear the thought of his not knowing her, and apparently feared her new grandeur was the cause of it.

The schoolmaster soothed her wounded feelings to the best of his ability, and Maggie went back happy to her old place on Alick's knee.

The rector's two daughters led off with a dashing duet, played in their best style. It was the overture to Oberon, and they certainly did their best to realize the intention of the composer ; especially in the rapid movement, the pace of which at times became more accelerated than was quite pleasant to the hearers, as indeed it was almost unendurable to the performers themselves.

Then the curate—a mild, nervous youth—read a very instructive paper on the flora

of the district, in which he had vainly endeavoured to boil down his knowledge of the subject to the comprehension of his audience. The paper might be clever, but was decidedly dry: he had not been able to resist technical terms and Latin names; and the children began to shuffle their feet about uneasily, and yawn without restraint.

The magic lantern was to be conducted on an intellectual and improving basis—so said the rector's lady—but considering this, it behaved as badly as it possibly could!

It was a very large one, with movable figures, and a practicable snow-storm; but the rector had evidently neglected to study the working of it thoroughly, for the most extraordinary freaks of nature took place.

In the storm, for instance, the flakes persistently snowed up instead of down,

until little Johnny Lisle rushed frantically to the rescue, and the rector hearing of his mistake, managed to put things right; but still all the flakes seemed to get mixed up somehow, gradually approaching the dimensions of huge snowballs, and threatening to extinguish the figures altogether.

The youngsters, however, enjoyed this part of the performance greatly, seeming to take the misfortunes for part of the fun.

“Oh, Alick, isn’t it jolly?” cried Dick, ecstatically.

“Look out you! There’s another whopper coming! There, I knew that chap would get a crack on the head if he didn’t go faster!”

Then, too, the musical box which was to play during the show, didn’t prove quite such a success as intended, because the tunes would come in wrongly! A

grand and solemn cathedral scene, with the celebration of High Mass going on didn't gain in dignity by being broken in upon by "Johnny comes marching Home," and equally ridiculous was the accompaniment of the "Old Hundredth" to a dance of peasants! Nelly approved of everything, and Alick could not resist the infection of her gaiety.

"What fun it is, and how I do enjoy it all!" said the child, looking up into the face of her companion. "Wasn't Percy a goose not to come too?"

Alick said "Yes; why didn't he?" but he was none the less glad that her brother was not there. Nelly always was more friendly with him, if Master Percy was not present.

"Oh, some stupid nonsense about it being only for poor people's children—but *you* are not poor now!" she said impulsively, as the boy gave a start of wounded

pride. "You are as nicely dressed as Percy, and you do look well, Alick, you do, indeed!" and her childish eyes gazed in frank admiration at her friend in all the glory of his Sunday suit.

Alick turned red, and grew bashful, but he didn't dislike it all the same!

Who could resist the innocent witchery of Nelly's looks and tones?

"Nonsense, Nelly, you mustn't flatter a chap up like that. But I do mean to be rich some day! Other folks have got on, and there's no reason why I shouldn't!" said Alick, confidentially.

"Oh, Alick!" responded Nelly in an awe-struck whisper, "and will you be like Signor Lorenzo, and have a great big circus, with camels, and elephants, and men in armour?"

"And bootiful ladies that jump through big hoops?" put in Maggie, with her wondering eyes fixed on her brother's face.

“And I’ll be one of the ladies that wear scarlet velvet habits, and ride on the spotted horses.”

“And me, too,” cried Maggie, jealously, pushing Nelly away, and putting her fat little arms round Alick’s neck.

“No, no, oo’ shan’t go in our Alick’s circus. Oo’s not his sister like me !”

This roused the little damsel’s anger at once.

“He loves *me* best,” she said, defiantly. When Alick didn’t deny it, Maggie began to cry. Then Nelly cried, too, for sympathy, and they ended by kissing and making friends ; and when Maggie fell asleep in Alick’s arms, Nelly’s head lay confidingly on his shoulder.

Mrs. Lisle came up to carry Maggie off, and the little picture amused and pleased her.

Talk of the feminine intellect not being far-sighted ! Mothers must be left out of

the question, surely, for they can see future prime ministers in their boys before they are breeched, and marry their daughters to Dukes while they are yet in long clothes.

Mrs. Lisle was no exception, though her dreams did not take so high a flight. She stroked Nelly's curls lovingly, and then took up her sleeping child.

"She's a bonny innocent bairn, is Nelly, whatever her mother may have been; and Alick's a lad to get on; for he's got plenty o' brains, though I say it as shouldn't! And queerer things than that have happened afore now!"

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT the time came at length when Alick Lisle finally left school, to begin the work of life in earnest. Farmer Dobson gave him regular employment now upon his farm.

But still, while following his horses along the furrows, turning over the sweet-smelling hay in summer, or binding and storing the grain of autumn, Alick never lost his boyhood's dreams. He was stronger and more energetic than when he scared the crows from the seed-corn, probably because better fed than at that time. His brain no longer refused to work, even when he was engaged in

manual labour. Instead of whistling merry tunes at the ploughtail like his companions, he would go through the lesson taught by Donald Cameron the night before, con his Latin verbs, or turn over and weigh carefully arguments by which to meet, sometimes even to refute, those of the schoolmaster. For already he had begun to take independent views. The tie between master and pupil was only strengthened by Alick leaving school, for the tuition which went on steadily in the evenings was now a work of love, not duty. The lonely man looked forward with eagerness to the coming of the lad, watching with intense interest the development of his character.

But when Alick was about sixteen, a great change came in his life, which for a time cut him adrift from his friend and guide, and threw him upon his own resources intellectually.

"Here's a letter from yer uncle Taylor, Alick!" exclaimed Mrs. Iisle one late autumn evening, as her son came in, eager to get to his studies as soon as possible. He began to take off his heavy boots and change his coat before going along to the schoolhouse, when his mother arrested his attention.

"I did think he'd forgotten me this time, such a while as it is since I heard on him; but lawk-a-daisy, blood's thicker nor water, after all's said and done! He says it's not for want o' thinkin' he hasn't written, for he's had us all in his mind long enough. And now, Alick, whatever do ye think he wants?"

"Dear knows! How should I tell?" asked Alick, without much show of interest.

The truth is, he was so well used to his mother's mysteries and wonders that they had long ceased to affect him much.

“ You’re a lucky lad, that I will say, though ye never give the attention ye ought to yer mother’s friends! But it’s a real wonderful openin’, there’s no mistake about that! ”

“ What is, mother? ” asked Alick, calmly, pouring himself out a second cup of coffee, and eating his supper with a relish quite unimpaired by curiosity.

“ Much ye seem to care about it, Alick, I must say that, ” and Mrs. Lisle looked not a little cross at her unemotional son as she spoke. “ But that’s always the way whenever I commence talkin’ to ye, as if nothin’ yer mother could say would be much matter alongside o’ yer wonderful books. Anybody else would ha’ been grateful for such a chance o’ betterin’ themselves; but you—you’re just yer father over again. ”

“ But I don’t know anything to be grateful for yet, ” said Alick again, be-

ginning to despair of ever getting at the meaning of his mother's words.

"Houts, Alick, don't ye try to aggravate me so, there's a canny lad! Haven't I been tellin' ye all the time, only you're so taken up wi' yer own thoughts that a sensible word one cannot get into ye. And a deal more good would come o' this than o' all the larned books i' the world, that's the worst on it!" she ended, pathetically, wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron.

Such a boy as that Alick of hers was enough to try any poor woman's patience, he was, indeed!

Then, somewhat illogically, after her tears were gone, Mrs. Lisle began to launch out into praise of her brother's cleverness and learning, and comment upon the beauty of his handwriting, which was neat as print, and the spelling a thing to be wondered at.

In desperation, Alick took the letter gently out of her hand, and read it for himself.

It was an offer from Mrs. Lisle's brother, who was head gamekeeper on a large estate in north Northumberland, to take Alick to live with him, and teach him his own business, with a view of advancing him to the post of under-keeper when he should have mastered all the knowledge required for it.

Alick folded the letter, and returned it to his mother.

"I don't see my way clear yet, mother," he said, slowly. "I must have time to think it over."

"Think ? What thinkin' does it need ?" asked the good woman, indignantly. "Folks all know that a keeper's is a gentleman's life to such as us."

"There's lots o' things to be considered besides the work, mother. How would

my reading go on with nobody near to give me a lift when I came to a hard bit that I couldn't understand? Not but that I'd have more time for thinking," he added, meditatively.

"There ye go again with yer think-thinkin'. Much good that'll do for ye, I reckon!" and Mrs. Lisle made a gesture of extreme contempt. Then solemnly shaking her head, "The chap that ever I heerd on as doin' the most o' that was Jack Hall, the Chartist, and just see what it brought him to. Shot dead by the soldiers he was, in one o' the riots, that's what came o' him; and in prison for long afore that, too, wi' his wife and bairns starvin', no less."

"Surely ye wouldn't hold him up to be laughed at, mother, a man like that, a martyr and a hero? What if he did die for his cause, since his work lived after him?"

“Oh, Alick, how can ye? Ye bad, bad boy, that ever I should ha’ lived to hear ye say such a thing! Ye never got notions like that from yer mother, I will say that. I always held that if folks minded their own business, and didn’t run into no debt, they weren’t far out; and if they went to church on Christmas Day, and Good Friday, and Whitsun Sundays—even if they did fall asleep when the sermon was extra long and the weather hot, they were on the right road, and might leave the thinking to the squire and the parson, them that has nothin’ else to do. It stands to reason they’ll do it better than us poor folks, for their minds aren’t fashed about meat and drink and the rent day!”

“That’s not the way nowadays, though! Our deepest thinkers have sprung from the working classes,” replied Alick, who had been reading a good deal, and who

showed a youthful weakness by his slightly argumentative tone.

"Wey, wey, Alick, it's no use me talkin', for ye will ha' yer own way in the end," broke in the mother, impatiently; "but ye'll go to yer uncle's all the same, hinny, won't ye now?" Then coaxingly she added, "It'll bring ye among real gentlefolks, and that'll knock the wrong-headedness out o' ye."

"I'll think it over," said Alick, again, as he rushed away, eager to tell Donald Cameron, and be guided by his advice in the matter.

The little parlour at the school-house was almost in darkness when Alick entered it. He found the schoolmaster sitting in a despondent attitude gazing into the slowly dying fire, so intent upon his meditations that he did not notice the lad's entrance until touched upon the shoulder.

“Why, Alick, laddie, is this you? I had given ye over for the nicht, and had gone back to auld lang syne,” he said, starting from his brown study. “The mair fule me, that has no a pleesant past to look back on—no a pleesant past, nor a future, for the matter o’ that.”

Cameron rose hastily as he spoke, as though making an effort to throw off the gloom which oppressed him. He lit the lamp which stood on the table. The remains of his solitary and frugal meal were there still; the little teapot with a weak decoction most people would have pronounced undrinkable, the crust of a stale loaf, and a microscopical pat of butter.

Plain living and high thinking was evidently the order of things, for by the side of the tray lay open a volume of Carlyle’s “French Revolution.”

The villagers called the schoolmaster

mean, and indeed many a day-labourer fared more sumptuously and dressed better than Donald Cameron. But Alick Lisle, who knew how ungrudgingly his friend gave time, thought, and knowledge, and who saw deeper into the nature of the man; guessed that penuriousness was an acquired rather than a natural attribute.

The room was bare, but exquisitely clean and neat, and the only evidence of liberal expenditure was in the matter of books, which, on a set of plain deal shelves, almost covered one side of the wall. They, though unostentatiously bound, were numerous and well selected.

“And what are we to be busy with the nicht, Alick?” asked the schoolmaster, after he had cleared the table and mended the fire. “Have you got that problem worked out yet?”

“We’ll let Euclid alone to-night, Mr.

Cameron," answered the lad. "I want your advice very badly."

And thereupon he began to explain his uncle's offer, and the anxiety with which his mother urged him to accept it. After carefully weighing all the pros and cons, Cameron took the same view of the matter as Mrs. Lisle, arriving, however, at the decision by a different line of argument.

"Ye'll no stop long, even there, Alick, my man," he said, thoughtfully; "but it'll no be bad for ye in the mean time. And there's more siller to be had there, which is no a thing to be despised, for the lack on it is bad to bide whiles! Besides which, ye'll have more time for the books, and ye can think things weel out in the nicht watches. Ay, ay, there's no tellin' how much the better on it ye may be in the end."

Donald Cameron said nothing of his

own feelings in the matter, although he recognized with a pang the blank there would be left in his own life if Alick went away. Unconsciously to himself, the boy had crept into the heart of the lonely man. Indeed, Alick's very youth endeared him to one who fancied himself debarred from wife or child of his own.

But he was not selfish enough to allow this to influence his advice ; nay, the very consciousness of strong wishes one way made him give extra weight to the arguments on the other side.

Before the two separated, it was settled that Alick should enter upon the new life offered to him. Replying to some regret Alick expressed at the loss of his friend's help, the schoolmaster frankly confessed that his pupil was beyond him now in some respects ; and for the rest quite able to proceed alone.

“ Dinna heed the parting for that,

laddie," Cameron said, not without regret; "I would but fetter ye the noo, for ye've come to the time when siccan a mind as yours needs to strike out a new path for itself, if it's to do guid work i' the world."

Then, moved perhaps by some wish to be still an influence in the lad's development, the schoolmaster proceeded to pick out sundry books which he thought would be useful reading.

Soon he paused before one row of quietly bound volumes.

"Ye've no read Carlyle yet, Alick?" he said, inquiringly.

"Not yet," answered Alick; "you remember you only promised him to me when you thought I would be able to appreciate him."

"There's sma' fear o' that not happening noo, especially in the life you are going to; for he's a poet in his way is Carlyle,

though a rough one maybe ! He can teach you, if any one can, what the thousand sights and sounds o' nature mean. The sougning o' the wind through the leafless trees in autumn ; the mystery o' the pine woods where the gloom is thickest ; the grandeur o' presence in the sable-skirted nicht ; and what the voices of the thunder-storm, and the mountian torrent cry for ever. He'll, maybe, no tell ye much o' the gladness o' the dawns, or what the song o' the laverock speaks on, as it hovers over its wee nestie in the white clover, or the gospel the flowers preach in the bonnie springtime either. But what o' that ? Life's a sad thing at the best, so surely it isn't wise to cast over it a false glamour at the start ? ”

The schoolmaster forgot himself in his subject, and relapsed into the broad Doric of his native tongue, as he invariably did when excited.

Alick, of course, protested against robbing his friend of so many of his treasures, but Cameron would not hear a word of remonstrance.

“It isna’ muckle I ha’ to gie ye, laddie,” he said, sadly, “nor mony that I’d care to part wi’ them to, puir as they are ; but I ken fine how ye’ll value them baith for their own sakes, and the sake o’ the giver.”

And so parted Alick and the master who had been so kind to him.

The schoolmaster felt his loneliness increased tenfold, for the miss of the bright eager-hearted young nature, which at times had helped to take him out of himself and his own troubles, and had made him almost forget the burden which the wrong-doing of another had cast upon his shoulders.

CHAPTER IX.

IF Alick had formed any ideal notions of the life of a young assistant to a game-keeper, he soon had them dispelled, when he came under the command of his uncle. The work might not be hard, but it was pretty incessant, and severe enough, too, at times for that matter.

As for any leisure for settled study, that he found impossible for at least the first six months of his initiation. Night work, or at least night watching, unfitted him for the quiet hours he could at rare intervals have found ; and the many new interests and occupations kept him from much thinking on other subjects, until he

grew so used to them that they became mere routine. There were many things he liked about his new life in spite of these drawbacks. His habits of observation, naturally great, quickened under the strain kept upon them. He soon became conversant with the ways of every creature of the woods, from the cunning red fox to the tiny tree spider ; and the note-book he began to keep was not long in being filled with facts which would have delighted the mind of the keenest naturalist living.

His perfectly sound and healthy constitution fitted him physically for the calling he had entered upon. No amount of cold or exposure seemed to hurt him, and his uncle chuckled at the lad's determination never to give in, when the other young fellows looked and were ready to drop from over-fatigue.

“He's a good plucked one at any rate,”

the head keeper would say to himself, with satisfaction at his own kith and kin turning out so well. "There's no fear but he'll make a keeper in time, if he doesn't get any maggots in his head!"

For already the old man had detected signs of restiveness in his nephew, when little bits of humbugging, such as seem indispensable to the class in general, were practised.

When the pheasants were fed all about the drives and woodland walks, until they became as tame as barn-door fowls, and flocked there regularly, making a fine show in the eyes of Lord Royston; or when some gentleman of the shooting party who fancied himself a sure shot made notoriously poor work of it, but was flattered and praised to his face, in the most shameless manner, because he was known to be liberal in the matter of tips; or again, when farmers whose fields lay

near the lairs and burrows, were accused of setting traps, to account for the scarcity of ground game ; when the poultry dealer who was a friend of the head keeper could have told a very different tale had his opinion been asked ; such little tricks and dishonesties as these roused Alick and made it very difficult for him to be silent.

Of course there are gamekeepers whose characters are entirely above suspicion, and estates where no such doings are possible ; only Alick did not happen to have chanced upon one. Old Taylor was in some ways a good man to have on an estate. Though he liked, and indeed would have his own way in everything, and young Lord Royston, being easy-going and pleasure-loving, did not think it worth while to interfere much with him ; the battues were always most successful, and the shooting capitally managed.

"His lordship, your father, always liked to see things so and so," was a perfectly unanswerable argument in the mouth of the old keeper, and his master only replied to it with a laugh or a shrug of his shoulders.

Therefore it came to pass that Taylor was an autocrat on the estate of Lingham Park, and abused his power in the way autocrats so often do.

Alick could handle a gun pretty fairly before he left Fordham, but not up to his uncle's requirements by any means. The old man had not in general much patience to teach beginners the minutiae of his trade, but his nephew was made an exception. He was a quiet, painstaking pupil, usually grasping any practical idea pretty soon, and working it out carefully and well. Therefore Taylor soon began to depend on him a good deal, even laying burdens and responsibilities upon his

shoulders such as he never would have thought of in the case of other lads.

“ Nothing like hard work for keeping boys steady,” he said, with a chuckle, “ father kept me at it when I was his age, I mind that. I never had no time for readin’ the papers, and studyin’ things that couldn’t be of no use to me after ! I larned how to clean the guns and keep them in order, and the day when I was allowed to fire one off I was pleased I can tell you. I thought there was no fear but I’d hit a rabbit that was sitting quiet at the mouth of his hole, because the other chaps seemed to do it so easy ; but, Lord, how they did laugh at me when the smoke cleared off ; and I looked blank, when I saw I’d clean missed, after making cock sure of him. I took care to practise by myself after that for a bit, and it wasn’t long before I could hold my own with any on them.”

“You stick to me, Alick, and keep a quiet tongue in your head, and I’ll make a man of ye for the sake of poor Sarah, for she’ll be right glad to get one on ye so comfortably settled, I’ll warrant! And there’s no reason why ye shouldn’t step into my shoes in time; since blood’s thicker than water, and I’ve none o’ my own to come after me.”

The old man meant kindly; if he was a bit hard and short in the temper, and used language more forcible than elegant when angry.

Alick acknowledged his uncle’s good points, and tried his best to save him many worries and fatigues; but there was little or no sympathy between the two. Try as he might, the lad could not deeply respect one whose peccadilloes were so painfully apparent, and whose pleasures and ambitions were so different to his own.

To be quoted as an authority on dogs and horses, and appealed to for his opinion on any knotty point connected with the same; to be dreaded yet courted by his underlings, and to keep on outwardly good terms with the farmers with whom he drank many a social glass at the village tavern; while not scrupling to hint at their poaching proclivities in a *tête-à-tête* with their landlord; to tell stories which redounded neither to the credit of his honesty nor morality; but which made the women colour and accuse him of being "a queer, bad, funny-spoken man;" to be first everywhere, from the parlour of the Red Lion, to the servants' hall at the Park; these were the things old Taylor cared most about. He would boast, and not without reason, of his skill with the rod and the gun; of his personal strength and prowess; of his dexterity in hoodwinking gentlemen; and of the

vigorous health he enjoyed at near sixty years of age. He could wrestle with any man half as old, walk all day without feeling tired, and tell a lie without winking over it.

Such was the man under whom Alick spent five years of his youth ; years in which he developed rapidly both in body and mind ; growing into a quiet, reserved, rather hard man ; while companions of his own age were still to all intents and purposes mere boys. He learnt to hold his tongue, even when acts of what he could not help thinking injustice were done in his sight ; not because he in any way condoned them, but because he began to see the uselessness of any interference on his part.

It made him sullen at times, and not a little bitter, and tended to foster the discontent fast rising in him against things that be.

Then, having a little more leisure after mastering the details of his profession, he made his first plunge into Carlyle ; and a veritable plunge it was. After the first breathless gasp of amazement and dread at finding subjects he had never heard spoken of save in the most conventional manner, *could* be grappled with in an entirely unconventional and as he at first thought irreverent way, he was astonished to feel none the worse for the ducking. Again and again he dived, and the deeper he dived the more he liked it.

Carlyle's vehement and vituperative scorn of every base and cowardly trait in humanity thrilled the lad with an indignant sympathy ; for he saw life with the keen vision of a young and ardent observer. The intense appreciation of whatever is best and highest, and yet the tender, half-humorous excuses so often made for human shortcomings ; the

trumpet-call to virtue, strength, and self-reliance which rings through all the earlier writings of the historian, awoke responsive echoes in Alick's heart.

He thought them all out, these newly-awakened ideas, in the night watches, when he was alone in the woods. There, while the stars looked down upon his loneliness, he pondered the deep questions which have troubled the hearts of all young and thinking humanity since the world began.

CHAPTER X. .

It is not altogether wonderful that the cleverest of our artizan and working classes so often go over to atheism as soon as they begin to study or think.

The facts of science, and the difficulties of theology, come upon them all at once, just when they are matured enough in mental power and feeling to recognize their force.

The children of the higher classes get familiarized so early with the same thoughts, that they know or can feel nothing of the wonder, the awe, and the sickening faintness of soul which comes over a man, when for the first time, in

the full strength of manhood, he is brought face to face with the problems which have puzzled the wisest throughout all ages.

If you want a child to accept a thing without either interest or curiosity, you have only to tell it to him soon enough.

Whether the sun moves round the earth, or the earth round the sun, is not a matter of half so much importance, as whether George's new top will keep on whirling a moment or two longer than Willy's, or whether Tom's hoop can be kept going up the little ascent to the school-house. These are the problems which interest the young ones the most deeply.

Talk of teaching science at school! You may get a ready enough assent to facts already known, but will you ever manage to awaken eager thirst for new discoveries — any more than you will

make enthusiasts and martyrs by lessons from the Bible and catechism ?

Alick, who had been made thoughtful beyond his years by the experiences of a hard life, and his intense sympathy with the sufferings of the poor, but whose mind had been hemmed in by the conventional modes of reasoning of those about him, was now in his young manhood doomed to be awakened in earnest.

Visiting the nearest market-town, Morbury, on business one day ; he happened to have some time on hand ; and was attracted by some flaming posters into a lecture-hall, patronized principally by respectable mechanics for their meetings. There for the first time he heard the secularist theory of life propounded, in an address from one of the most eloquent speakers belonging to the cause.

The lecturer, a man of the name of Harding, had been brought up in the

Christian faith, and the teaching still clung to him, spite of all his advanced opinions. Even in denying its truth and its benefit to man, it was the leaven of Christianity, its pure morality, its disinterested benevolence that gave power to this man's words, and touched the hearts of his hearers.

It is true that the old doctrines of brotherly love and neighbourly charity were robbed of their setting, but the borrowed jewels shone no less brightly; indeed, their lustre helped to divert the eye from the flimsy network which now held them together.

Strange, that with all its boasted honesty, the secularist school scruples not to appropriate to its own use the maxims of the Church which it abhors!

Strange, too, that the lecturer, with all his sneers at the priest-craft, which, trading in hell or heaven, and "preaching

the Gospel, lived by the Gospel," should quietly ignore the fact that he himself was paid for his teaching, and well paid, too!

He found his ungodliness profitable to the life that now is; and calmly took credit for the purest benevolence, while he was robbing his disciples of their highest motives, their strongest hopes, their noblest aspirations; while he did not object either to plunge his hands pretty deeply into their pockets to further the cause.

Alick, however, did not see all this! He was spell-bound by the sophistries which seemed in his ears the most subtle of arguments, and the meretricious benevolence which passed with him for the truest gold.

For the first time in his life he seemed thoroughly awake. The jarring notes of earth's battle-march, which had before



only made him stir uneasily, or mingled in without breaking through his dreams, clanged now in his ears without either meaning or harmony. There was no conductor to the music, and life was made up of discordant wails, and random melancholy chords.

Unblessed with the calm imperturbable nature of some of our modern secularists, who trace man to mollusc without a thrill of anything save scientific curiosity, or that intense delight in proving a theory only known to professors of science, Alick's whole soul was torn and agonized by what he heard reeled off so glibly.

It was little to him that his mere body had been evolved from the lowest order of creation. God might have willed *that* so, and still be God! After all evolution was only another form of creative energy.

But thought? That *that* should be merely molecules in motion; that con-

science should be nothing but the hereditary effect on the individual of laws which had been found beneficial to humanity as a whole; that God had been created by man only to account for things not yet understood, and that there was no fountain of goodness and of love in the whole blank barren universe; that even the first love a child knew, the great unselfish mother love, was no sacred reflection of a higher sentiment, but merely the developed instinct of animalism—this was horrible, maddening! Alick's brain felt on fire.

He went back to his work hopeless and defiant. Defiant? What was there to defy?

Nature perhaps! Her seeming cruelties were brought forcibly enough before him in his life as a gamekeeper. Had he never heard a sceptical word uttered, he would yet, as a thinking being, have had



his moments of despairing doubt through this alone. The way all created things prey upon each other, from man downward; the infinite and seemingly unnecessary pain; the unceasing sorrow of the world—these almost drove him frantic at times. Surely it were better not to believe in God at all, than to contentedly accept in Him a being made up of cruelties and contradictions as so many do.

So he began to doubt, honestly enough, and with sorrow and shame unspeakable. But still his doubt grew, and thought, observation, and reason alike tended to overthrow the old faith.

A change came over him, too, in his feeling towards the woodland life.

How often before that time he had forgotten his gun or his traps in the mere sensuous delight of watching the beauty, the instinct, and the swiftness of his prey, and even allowed it to escape while

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so watching and admiring. Now all was altered. Sport gave him pleasure of that sort no longer. Either there came over him an almost sickening appreciation of the pain he was inflicting; or that conquered, a merely brutal passion for bloodshed. He recognized the latter phase with horror, but it was true nevertheless, and came on him more frequently as time passed on.

Wearied with long tramping under the summer sun, he threw himself down one day amongst the dry grass and bracken by the hedgerow.

Overhead the wind murmured softly through a lime tree in blossom, and the bees kept up a humming among the flowers; while a low chirping and buzzing of insect life came from a tangle of meadow-sweet and ragged robin at its foot.

The whole earth seemed at peace,

smiling up at the sky in thankfulness for the summer sunshine; and Alick gave himself up to the charm of the place, and forgot for the time being the questions which were wont to trouble him.

At least the world was good to live in, however it came into being; and the animals and insects had mostly a good time while living—for this hour at least he would be content to dream. Soon his thoughts travelled back to Fordham and all his boyhood's companions. How very little he had heard of Donald Cameron since he left. He had grown so much mentally since they parted, that imperceptibly there came a restraint over the letters which passed between them. Neither knew exactly where to find the other, as it were, although their affection might be as strong as ever. And little Nelly Scott, he wondered what she was like now? Was she as sweet and

innocent and pretty as on the day when they went fishing together ?

The spot where Alick was resting was by the side of a plantation ; and all at once a hawk came sailing over the tops of the tall trees, in rapid pursuit of a flock of small birds, common finches apparently. The little birds were uttering sharp twittering cries of distress, and fluttering here and there in confusion. The young gamekeeper instinctively put out his hand for the gun which lay on the bank beside him, then he drew it back.

The creature was only following its natural bent for prey ; what right had he to punish it because it did not go against nature ?

So he kept motionless, when the hawk, singling out his victim, swooped down upon it suddenly, and struck a death-blow with its terrible beak ; and then tearing a single tit-bit from the still quivering

breast of its prey, left it, epicure-like, for more ignoble foes to finish.

Turning from this scene, which had broken in so rudely upon the beautiful calmness, his eye fell upon a rabbit burrow opposite.

He had lain so long perfectly still, that the little creatures had ventured to leave their holes, and were playing about quite unconcernedly; cropping the short grass, or with ears erected listening for more distant danger.

Then stealthily from the plantation glided the long snake-like body of a weasel, winding in and out of the thick undergrowth of flowers and bracken. Becoming conscious of the approach of a foe so persistent and deadly, the rabbits for the most part scuttled off and popped into their holes for safety, although in reality they were little more secure there than elsewhere.

But one unfortunate bunny, young and helpless, sat quite motionless, never making any attempt to escape. Probably it was stupefied by fear, or else fascinated by its enemy.

Alick seems fascinated too, for he makes no effort to help the feeble little creature, although one would fancy that the mere human instinct in favour of the weaker side would prompt him to do so, to say nothing of the keeper's hatred of the game destroyer.

"What is the use of saving *one*, when the whole world is full of cruelty, rapine, and injustice?" he mutters between his teeth. "How could a good God make such a venomous creature as that?—more like a bit of the devil's handiwork, if there be a devil? Go on, bloodthirsty little brute, fulfil your God-given mission!"

And the weasel crept out upon his

prey, which, when it felt at last the danger, made frantic stupid little rushes, running round in a circle until it fell down exhausted in the power of its enemy.

Alick had seen enough. He could imagine the rest. How the life-blood would be drained from the still living veins, or the brains laid open and demolished while sensation still remained to it. He was familiarized with such sights, and yet that day they shocked and disgusted him, as though they were a new revelation.

Poor Alick! It was his own living, sensitive soul that was in the power of his enemy. In agonized entreaty he asked what it all meant?

He had been taught that death came only through the fall of man, but now he knew this to be false. The earth hid grim secrets of pain and anguish, and mangled forms, before there was any trace of man's existence.

Once more he threw himself on the grass, but this time he hid his face amongst it. When at length he lifted his head there were traces of tears on his cheeks.

He seemed to have passed with a leap from boyhood to manhood, and the tears were those wrung from a man in his bitterest agony.

CHAPTER XI.

A wood in Spring. What in all creation equals it? Delicate tracteries of boughs, studded with emerald leaflets, crisp and yet satiny in texture; through which the bright, fresh, uncertain May sunshine glances coquettishly; only just long enough at a time to make one wish for more. The beeches are, perhaps, the most beautiful of all, in their feathery lightness of leafage, but the planes give a ruddy hue to the woods, as the well-defined buds push forward, each cased in its pinkish sheath; to be thrown off, anon, when the bunch of vigorous young leaves grows too big for it.

All the air is full of the pleasant scent of growing things ; fresh sap flowing in the trees ; fresh leaves peeping out from the rusty old bramble sprays, which form a trellis-work over the ground ; fresh grass pushing up vigorously through the dead brown leaves and twigs of last year.

Pure white anemones nod their fairy bells where trees are thickest ; in the sunny nooks the primroses sparkle brightly ; and where the ground is marshy, golden buttercups and blue forget-me-nots mingle. Here and there a tree has been cut down, and from its peeled trunk sends out its pleasant pungent odour of bark.

Overhead the birds fly in and out of their unfinished nests, making a pleasant rustle of wings ; or better still, they pour out their happiness in a flood of melody ; while the never-ceasing coo of the wood-

pigeon has a soothing melancholy charm of its own.

Although Alick Lisle in his daily occupations saw more of the different aspects of the woods than most people, he never tired of watching their varying beauties as the seasons changed ; never grew accustomed to consider Nature as so completely an adjunct to his business, that he ceased to observe it.

The leafy twilight of full summer foliage ; the glorious tints which Autumn paints the dropping leaves ; the sombre, unadorned grandeur of the aisles of trees in December ; or the delicate tracery of snow-laden branches against a clear frosty sky ; each and all of these had their charm for him.

But he was young, and therefore loved springtime in the woods best of all, especially when those woods lay near his old home, and he walked through them

on his way to it, for a week's holiday. Longer than that he could not get leave to stay, spite of the long time he had waited for even so small an indulgence.

The breeding season was at its height, and with the young broods needing careful attention, his uncle would require all the help he could get.

Alick's eye grew bright and his step brisk as he passed all the old familiar spots. The path lay by the river. There was the place where Johnny and he kept the old boat moored, the old boat so dangerously full of holes, which they took such pains to cobble up, after the young ladies at the Hall had discarded it as unsafe. What hard work it used to be to bale her out, especially as one dare not stop for a moment to rest, and how terrified little Nelly Scott had been that day they took her into the middle of the river, and the boat got half full of water.

Little Nelly ! was she as good-natured and happy as ever, he wondered ? Why she would be—how old ? About seventeen or somewhere near it now—quite a woman, to be sure ! Perhaps she had grown into a young lady, though, like some farmers' daughters he had seen, and whom he thought of with a disdainful curl of the lip. Too fine to know anything about their fathers' business, and sighing for nothing but town life and town amusements. If she was like them she would be too proud to know him ; but there was one consolation, if she was like them, he wouldn't care to know her !

All at once, from amongst the trees in front of him, came the clear echoing note of the cuckoo. It was the first time he had heard it that year. What was the old superstition about it ? He was sure there was one, and that it was a pretty one too. Oh, yes, of course ! Listen

attentively when you hear the first cuckoo cry, for in the direction from which the voice comes you will find your true, true love ; or, as another form of it ran, in the direction in which you are going when you hear it, there you will find the same blissful treasure.

Alick smiled as he remembered this, and then—and then, only a few steps further, and raising his eyes from the ground, there was the very girl who had been in his thoughts !

Nelly, grown into a very sweet, lovable-looking girl ; with clear brown eyes which kept all their childish fun lurking in their depths, while they had gained the deeper expression of early womanhood, when the mystery and the possibilities of life are first beginning to dawn.

She was sitting on a fallen tree trunk, making up a lot of wild flowers into a posy, to beautify the dull old parlour at home.

As Alick came near, she looked up at first curiously, then with a glad cry of surprise, started to her feet, letting her pretty flowers fall to the ground.

“Alick, Alick, how you are——” she was going to say “grown,” but stopped, and said *changed* instead, for she remembered that Percy was dreadfully annoyed when any one accused him of the crime of growing, and judged that all young men were alike!

But there was no mistake about it, Alick *had* grown! When he left home four years before, he was a broad-shouldered, stumpy lad of sixteen, slow of development in body as in mind.

Since then he had gained nearly a foot in height, his chest had expanded, and his back straightened; and now in his velveteen coat and suit tightly fitting to his close knit figure, he looked as fine a specimen of a well-built, good-looking

young Northumbrian, as one could wish to see in a day with the pheasants.

A closer scrutiny certainly would have shown an element of discontent and sadness in the strong young face, but a superficial observer would have been content to admire the rich sunburnt complexion, the steady grey eyes, and the broad forehead with the closely curling hair around it.

"I'm glad you know me, Nelly," said Alick, with an admiring look. "I think I would have known you anywhere."

"But I was only a little girl when you went away, and now ——"

"You are a woman, and a very pretty one, too!" Alick finished, gallantly.

He *had* improved, Nelly thought! She stole a glance at him from under her eyelashes. Really, Alick Lisle, clumsy, stupid, good-natured old Alick, had grown a fine strong fellow, much more attractive

than half the young fellows about there ! What a pity he was only a keeper ! Nelly, a true farmer's daughter, shared the contempt and dislike for gamekeepers common amongst her class.

Where had he learnt to pay compliments, she wondered ? Presently, he did not very well know how, Alick had forgotten his impatience to get home, and found himself sitting on the log beside Nelly, watching her as she arranged her bouquet afresh, and talking over all the old happy child days together. Playfully they reminded each other of incidents which, till now, had slipped from their memories, and made the most of their former intimacy, in the way people have when they want to make use of an old tie to help in weaving a new one.

“ Are you as fond of being in the open air as you used to be ? ” asked Alick,

after a pause ; then, with a twinkle in his eye, " Do you remember what your ideal of happiness once was ? "

" Something stupid, of course ! " said the girl, with a laugh.

" I'm not so sure of that," replied the young keeper, gravely. " We were to live somewhere together—in the woods, I believe—and catch trout all day long, and eat jam pasty, weren't we ? It doesn't sound so bad, do you know—providing we were—together ! "

" What nonsense, Alick ! I'm sure I never wished for anything so foolish." Nelly blushed furiously, though a smile lurked at the corners of her rosy lips, while she tried to look serious.

" What is the saying folks have about the cuckoo, Nelly ? " went on the young fellow, after a moment, asking the road he knew, with the coolest assurance. " I heard it for the first time just before I



saw you, and it came from the tree you are sitting under, I do believe!"

But Nelly was not going to be caught in that way. He really went too fast, there was no doubt of that, considering that he had not seen her since she was a child.

Perhaps—and Nelly tossed her head at the thought—the girls about where he lived were ready to flirt with any good-looking young fellow at a minute's notice. She was made of different stuff to that! Alick really must be taught his place, and not allowed to presume upon an old intimacy of which she was more than half ashamed now. And yet—at times his eyes looked so like those of the old comrade she used alternately to tease and to pet, that it was difficult to resist the charm of them.

"I must be going home," said the girl, rising and holding out her hand. "I

shall take the short cut over the stepping-stones here ; so good-bye ! ”

“ You are not angry, Nelly ? ” asked Alick, holding the little brown hand in his, and looking appealingly out of his honest eyes. “ I am only a clumsy sort of fellow—and—and I’m not used to girls’ ways, you know, so don’t be vexed with me if I say anything stupid. ”

“ It isn’t that—I’m not vexed, I mean. ”

“ Let me help you over the water, then. ”

Nelly laughed. Little need was there for any one to help *her* !

Her head was as steady as a rock, and her step as firm as a goat’s, as she leaped lightly from stone to stone, scarcely touching Alick’s outstretched hand.

Landed at the other side, she paused a moment.

“ You will be coming to see father and

Percy ? ” she said, hesitatingly ; and Alick, it is needless to say, assented.

He watched her as she tripped up the bank and along the footpath which led over the fields to her home. What a pretty girl she had grown ! Too bad that one cannot be just on the same free, frank footing as in the old days !

He had even thought her affection for him then rather a bore sometimes, certainly he had had a boyish dislike of caresses. They would be more bearable now ! Whatever Alick Lisle was slow in, it was not falling in love, for in less than ten minutes he was madly, hopelessly, desperately in love with Nelly Scott, his aforetime companion and playmate.

CHAPTER XII.

Wonderfully delighted was Mrs. Lisle with her son's appearance, after the first greetings were over, and she had leisure to inspect him.

Everything, from his velveteen coat to his manners, came in for a share of her admiration.

It was something new to Alick to win such complete approval from his mother, and he was as much delighted as surprised, until unwittingly she gave him the key to the enigma.

"Ye cannot deny now, surely, that yer mother was in the right of it, Alick? Lawk-a-daisy! to think as how ye might

ha' been nothin' but a ploughman yet, but for listenin' to my advice—though loth enough ye were to take it, that I will say! But we'll not mind that now, for it's not for yer mother to upcast yer stubbornness to ye, and bygones had best be bygones."

Here the widow paused for breath, and to give her son time to admit the wisdom she had shown. However, the young fellow proving slow in giving her all the honour of his improved looks, she went on again, rather disappointedly.

"Wey, wey, ye never were a ready one wi' the tongue, Alick, but ye might own it was me that did it, that I will say! Forbye that it was through my own brother the offer came to ye. And he's gettin' an auld man now, is William, and it's naught but nat'rel that ye'll step into his shoes afore long. Surely that'll content ye, my man? For if eighty

pound a year, wi' free house and firin', to say naught o' other parquisites that one mustn't talk about, wouldn't satisfy a man, why I don't know what would ! ”

“ Oh yes, I know you deserve the credit of it, mother,” said Alick, at last. “ Not that I'm so sure it would suit me, after all,” he added, in a lower tone.

But what was the use of vexing her ? He did not care so much for the life as he had expected to do, perhaps ; but while he could see no way to doing better, why should she be disillusioned ? As for the post of head-keeper, the petty ambition amused him, while it seemed to set him further apart from all his mother could care about.

With the ambitions he was fostering she would, he knew, have no patience, for she would think them absurd and chimerical.

But there was one upon whose sympathy

he believed he might still count, and it was not long before he found his way to the familiar little door of the school-house.

He found Donald Cameron alone as usual, sitting with his back towards the door, writing busily.

Startled by the clear, ringing voice which greeted him, the schoolmaster looked up.

"Heck, me! Is this you, Alick? You were but a laddie when ye left us, and noo—I wadna' ha' kent ye but for the voice."

Then the two found themselves shaking hands heartily.

"This is like the dear old times!" exclaimed Alick, drawing his chair up to the fire and putting his feet up on the fender—a familiarity, however, which he would never have ventured upon in the old times he alluded to.

Donald Cameron examined the young fellow with increasing surprise. Where was the likeness to the plodding, rather slow-witted boy who had left him only a few years ago, in this easy-mannered man of the world, with his quick eye, and capable, resolute face ?

He alone had seen what the promise in the lad meant ; but even he had been all unprepared for this rapid development. Then, too, there was a joyous ring in the voice, a sparkle in the eye, and a proud carriage of the head which spoke of the eager hopefulness of young manhood.

It seemed to Cameron, that the one thing he had dreaded for his pupil, namely, the restless discontent which almost invariably accompanies that intense thirst for knowledge he knew the boy to possess, was either altogether absent, or had not yet gained much ground. The truth is, that the master



was deceived for the time being, by Alick's present mood.

Young love had cast its glamour over everything. Many battles would need fighting, many wrongs need redressing, but he was ready for them all. However wicked the world might be, it was yet capable of redemption.

Alick had been almost a pessimist before, but he was one no longer. Rather, he was a nineteenth-century Don Quixote riding forward to overthrow the enemies of happiness, namely, oppression, tyranny, and superstition. That he was strong enough to triumph, he never doubted. Inspired by love, supported by hope, failure was impossible.

All this revolution of feeling was due to the fact that a girl of sixteen had smiled upon him, and blushed beneath his admiring gaze! Poor Alick! he was very far gone indeed.

With perhaps a passing sigh for the old relationship of master and pupil, Donald Cameron at once accepted Alick as an equal, and to his own surprise found himself talking of things he had seldom mentioned before to any one ; his own early ambitions and unsuccessful attempts to gain a footing in the world of literature.

There was no little pathos in the way he told all this, but underlying that pathos the younger man could not help recognizing an element of weakness.

Perhaps Cameron did not altogether care for success now. He had lived so long a disappointed man, that there lay a certain pleasure in fancying himself unappreciated by a matter-of-fact age incapable of understanding true poetry.

"This is an age of realism," he said, with an impassioned protest against the hopes and energies Alick's words partially

reawakened in him ; “ realism in art, realism in religion or non-religion, more especially realism in literature. What room is there left in it for poetry—the literature of more ideal times ? ”

“ Write prose, then,” replied Alick, energetically. “ I deny the truth of your statement ; though, like most falsities, there is a grain of truth in it. But if you believe it, why not write what the age wants, instead of railing at it ? ”

“ What good ? ” said the other, dreamily. “ Besides, how am I to tell that what I write has any real value after all, since it isn’t wanted ? Better accept the dictum of the editors at once, and give up trying. All said and done, what will a bit of transitory fame do for my life ? ”

Alick tossed his head indignantly.

“ If that’s the way you look at it, I’ve done with you,” he exclaimed. “ It’s neither your good nor mine we’ve got

to think of! But if we've got anything to say that'll help to raise humanity one iota, for truth's sake let us out with it!"

"What would ye have me to do?" cried Cameron, startled. "It's no my fault but my misfortune that garred me be born out of my time."

"Born out of your time! I thought better of you than that, Cameron. That's a miserable sophism, any way, by which you hope to lull your conscience into forgetfulness of its high ideals, its noble aspirations, all that tended to raise you above the brutes. There never was a man born out of his time. Rouse yourself and look about you, man! "What do you see? A world, the one part of which is employed in nothing but money getting and money spending; sinking its better nature (and it will be an ill day for us when we cease to believe

it has one) in a sea of pleasant sins and sensualities from which it does not care to lift itself. If it thinks at all it only does so to try and explain as materially as possible the mystery of its own creation, its own identity. The rest, and by far the larger part of humanity, is left suffering from the selfish thoughtlessness, the careless luxuriousness of its fellows, living and dying without a notion even of the existence of what you call the ideal; but which might be made the real, did men choose it so."

Cameron, astonished at this burst of feeling from his old pupil, and the force with which it was expressed, did not interrupt it. A touch of amusement mingled with his interest, before it was ended.

"Was there ever an age needing poetry more?" went on the speaker, energetically. "Nay, I will go further, and ask,

if there was ever an age when the elements of poetry came more readily to the hand of a master? Only, there is one thing—he must seek them out, for they do not lie on the surface, and he will not find them else! Go to real life for your heroism. Live among men, not isolated from them, and if you do, I venture to predict that in less than a year's time you will write something worthy to live. Ay, and that will live, and do its work nobly!”

The young fellow had been carried away by his subject, but meeting his friend's eye, he suddenly became conscious of the rather dogmatic tone he had once or twice adopted.

He had not only forgotten the former relationship existing between Cameron and himself, but also the fact that he was talking to an older and more experienced man.

Because he had been lucky enough to have a couple of short articles accepted and published in a magazine of fair standing, was that any reason for his laying down the law in such an absurd fashion?

He burst out laughing at the idea.

"Too bad of me to talk like that, to you, of all people!" he said, apologetically. "Why don't you pull me up, as you always used to do, when I was making an ass of myself?"

"Hech, man, it's no bad to hear ye," answered the schoolmaster, good-naturedly; "it minds ane o' the times when things were worth the fechtin' over!"

"But ye've not given up writing yet, Mr. Cameron?" and Alick turned with interest to the table, where the writing materials lay.

"Ay, I do a bit whiles still," replied the schoolmaster, "just a wheen scattered

verses when the time hangs heavy. But they're puir things at the best, I fear!"

Half tenderly, half disdainfully, he took up the papers as he spoke; then with a sudden instinct of shyness let them drop, and closed the portfolio.

Love could never be his, alas! but in the few disjointed and unfinished poems there, the yearnings of a naturally tender but unsatisfied heart had often found the expression they craved.

"But you will surely let me see some of them? I mean to bother you to look over mine some night; I give you warning!" And the verses were yielded up not altogether unwillingly.

At a little earlier date Alick would probably have found the poems too sentimental, womanish even, but in his softened mood was not disposed to be too severely critical.

One especially he liked—

"A CAULD GRAY WARLD.

- "A cauld gray warld lies oot
Ayont the window pane,
A warld o' fear and doot,
A warld o' storm and rain.
- "Wrinkled, and puir, and auld,
A dowie pair are we,
When life itself graws cauld,
How should we cheerfu' be?
- "Na' but auld age has cheer,
When love bides wi' us still,
We haud each ither dear
Let time di' what it will!
- "We mind o' joys ance felt,
O' joys and sorrows too—
For when in dool we knelt
As ane oor hairts beat true.
- "We luik na' back wi' sighs,
Nor count oor blessin's few,
Tho' mists creep ower the skies
Some sunset gleams glint thro'.
- "And see! The storm is past,
The wind faas wi' the day,
And peace has come at last,
Tho' a' about be gray."

The young fellow's fancy flew to the far-off future. He saw himself and Nelly sitting by the fireside, a pair of gray old folks, but lovers still ; and the poet could not but feel flattered by the emotion his reader showed as he lingered over the verses.

CHAPTER XIII.

PERCY SCOTT was very discontented with the world at this time.

His was not what is popularly called the "Divine discontent" of genius; his easy-going, pleasure-loving nature knew nothing of the feeling which can only find rest in work and in achievement; but it was discontent with his position, life, expectations; above all, with the fact that his father expected both Nelly and he to "work like 'common people,'" as the lad himself expressed it.

Because it was taken for granted that he should understand all the practical part of a farmer's duties, and not only

that, but be ready to put his hand to
with the rest, whatever was doing; the
lad imagined that his father was unam-
bitious, vulgar, mean; content to let his
children sink instead of rise; or worse
still, that he found absolute pleasure in
degrading them before their inferiors.

Other young farmers whose fathers
were as well off as his, had their amuse-
ments, recreations; had a day's hunting
now and then, and a decent horse kept
for them; while he, the best looking and
smartest of all the youths there, was
allowed none of these indulgences.

In fact, as years rolled on, and Percy
grew into manhood, Mr. Scott waxed
more and more severe and exacting.
Looking at his son's soft dark eyes, those
eyes which seemed made to reflect only
sunny skies, while their owner basked in
the pleasures of life; eyes which had in
fact a Southern un-English look about

them ; Mr. Scott's face would grow set and stern ; they reminded him all too forcibly of those which had stolen away his peace of mind years ago. There was a lack of moral backbone about the boy ! If this could be replaced by a stern training in the roughnesses and realities of hard work, would it not be well to be conscientiously severe, even though it went sore against your own heart to be so ?

Although Farmer Scott petted and praised his pretty Nelly openly, and took little or no notice of his boy, he knew well enough deep down in his heart that it was not the girl that he loved most dearly.

Many a time he watched Percy, when the lad thought him cold and abstracted ; noted with pride, and yet with a strange pang of remembrance the grace of his tall, slight, but well-knit figure, the proud

way he carried his head, the mellow sweetness of his low-pitched voice.

“What a shame to make such a gentlemanly-looking fellow into a farmer,” some of the lad’s relations had ventured to say ; but John Scott did not agree with them ; or if such a thought ever did cross his mind, he stifled it at once as both a false and foolish one.

Refinement, education, love of pleasure, what had they led to in the time he looked back on with such bitterness ?

Percy must rough it ; get over his delicacy of mind and body at the same time ; be out in all weathers, and perform all sorts of unpleasant tasks. Percy must be a *man*, not a pseudo fine gentleman !

Just as if a tender exotic would have any chance of growing into a hardy shrub, by being planted out in a north-east border !

Percy was fond of getting into quiet,

out-of-the-way places, and brooding over his fancied griefs. Anything seemed better than trying to work them off in a healthy fashion !

His father called this skulking ; and would give him bitter, scornful tirades against it. But in vain.

When anything he specially disliked was going on, Percy would be found missing mysteriously.

Creeping into the woods with a soiled and dog's-eared novel, he would lie *perdu* all the summer's day ; or if the weather was too bad for this, would beg or borrow money enough for a run into the nearest town ; where he had a little circle of not too reputable acquaintances ; billiard-markers, betting-men, etc.

The lad was not altogether bad ; he was no hypocrite at least, and made no secret of his longing to be away from home and farm life.

Perhaps, if Mr. Scott would have listened to these loudly expressed wishes, and yielded a little—had it only been for a time—and found him some more congenial employment, the result might have been different ; but this was just the one thing that the obstinate man would not consent to do.

Percy was thinking over all his grievances one morning soon after Alick's return, sitting meanwhile at the foot of an old stone wall in Hope Lane. This lane was a pretty, damp, little-frequented road, which was sunk between two high banks, and led from the hills down to a ford over the Wythe.

He had been set to work on the turnip land that morning, but as soon as ever his father's back was turned, he produced his ugly short pipe, lit it, and slunk off, unobserved, to this retired place, where he could " laze " to his heart's content.

The sun was warm, and he was sheltered from the wind, so on the whole he began to feel tolerably comfortable ; although the budding beauty of tree and grass and flower did not move him to the pleasurable sensations they might have done, had he loved nature more and himself less.

Of course there would be an awful row at night ; but then he was growing accustomed to rows, and did not mind them so much as he used to do !

There was only one thing that in the least disturbed the composure of his mind, and this was a nervous dread that had haunted him for the past day or two. A rumour was current in the village that Farmer Bell's retriever had been bitten a few days before by a rabid dog—since destroyed—and had, after breaking his chain, taken to the woods.

It was not mere cowardice which made

the lad give a shudder whenever the thought of meeting this brute recurred to him, which it kept doing with a frequency inconceivable to a stronger nature.

He was ashamed of the feeling, and yet could not get over it, try as he might. Was it true, as his father would say contemptuously, "*Thou* should have been the lass, not Nelly!" Every danger he could by any possibility have to meet came before him, and was faced in a thousand different ways, while there was not the slightest apparent chance of such a danger happening. He could no more help his imagination working in this fashion, than he could help having black eyes and an olive skin.

It so happened that Alick Lisle had also thought of Hope Lane as a pleasant retreat that fine morning, and came sauntering down the road enjoying his unwonted leisure. He had not seen

Percy Scott since his return home, and stood a minute or two interchanging greetings with him. The old feeling of antagonism between them seemed still to be there, for their words were few and guarded, and there was little pretence of cordiality.

Alick studied Percy silently. He was Nelly's brother, therefore more interesting on that ground than he would otherwise have been.

How *could* he be Nelly's brother? He wasn't a bit like her!

After he was left alone Percy forgot Alick's very existence. Percy to Percy had interest enough to prove all absorbing.

Alick, walking slowly on, swinging his stick in his hand, all at once heard a cry of alarm, and looking back saw Percy scrambling over the wall, out of the road.

Poor nervous imaginative Percy!

This danger at least was real, real enough to unman him. He saw the panting, frenzied beast come tearing on, and felt in imagination its hot breath already on his face. It was not true, then, the saying he had so relied on, that dogs in a state of rabies will not near water!

The gleaming of the river shone through the trees at the foot of the lane, and yet on came the brute, terrible in its mysterious agony.

With presence of mind he would have been safe on the other side of the wall in no time, but his nerves had given way utterly. With a shriek he fell, caught his foot in a spray of bramble, and rolled into the middle of the road, almost into the very jaws of the creature he was trying to escape from.

But Alick was quick enough to prevent this. In a moment he had seized Percy's prostrate form, and half pulled, half

thrown him over the wall into safety ; not, however, without danger to himself.

The dog sprang savagely upon him, and with a growl made a snap at his arm, catching his sleeve and tearing a piece right out of it. Alick with a powerful effort swung himself round, throwing the animal off as he did so.

Springing two or three steps back, the young man stood at bay, and snatching off his hat, held it before him. This acted momentarily as a shield, for the creature seized it as the first thing in its way. Directly its teeth closed on the hat, Alick's right foot, clad in a heavy shooting boot, dealt it a terrible kick beneath the lower jaw, which threw it backwards stunned and helpless for a time. After this, three or four desperate blows with his heavy stick, and the beast lay before him lifeless. Alick stood panting for a while, recovering himself after the encounter.

The whole incident had passed so quickly, that his head swam a little with the suddenness of it, now that the danger was over ; although he had managed to keep cool enough when coolness was needed.

Then all at once a thought struck him. Great beads of sweat stood on his brow, with the terror of it. He was not sure whether the bite had penetrated his skin, or his sleeve only ! Horrible ! Any death but that one.

“ God help me, not that ! ” he cried, forgetting his newly-acquired belief that there was no God to hear his cry.

He tore off his coat, and rolled up his sleeve. Oh, the blessed, blessed relief ! The skin was not even bruised. His loose velveteen sleeve had saved it.

For a moment the reaction made him feel sick.

What a strange subtle hold these old traditions have on the mind ! Why, the

first impulse he had now was to cry aloud,
 “ Thank God ! ”

After all, there *was* a ghastly blank when
 You couldn't say this conscientiously !

Then he thought of his companion.

Percy had fainted, and it was some
 time before Alick could get him to show
 any signs of consciousness ; but at last a
 faint colour came to his lips, and his eyes
 opened.

Then Alick put his arm round the lad,
 and raised him gently from the ground.

“ You had better try to get home,
 Percy. Do you think you could walk
 now, with hold of my arm ? You can
 lean as heavy as you like ! ”

Percy glanced at the proffered arm,
 and turned whiter than ever ; then his
 eyes travelled on to where the poor brute
 which had caused the mischief lay motion-
 less on its side. A convulsive shudder
 passed over him.

Alick greatly feared he would faint again. "Come, come, be a man!" he said gravely, not without a certain contemptuous pity, and Percy made an effort to keep on his feet.

After walking a little way up the lane, he stopped suddenly.

"Were you bitten?" he asked in a low voice.

"No; the skin is not broken—my coat saved me."

Soon after Percy made another effort.

"I suppose I ought to thank you for saving me?" he said ungraciously. Then his higher impulses got the better of his wounded egotism. "I don't know how you *could* come back, when you were safe yourself. It was very brave of you, but I *couldn't* have done it, had it been ever so!"

CHAPTER XIV.

ALICK's sudden passion for Nelly Scott proved more serious than its rapid development might have foreshadowed.

It was delicious, after tossing on a sea of doubt and despair, to let himself drift, effortless, receptive, vaguely happy, into a sunny sheltered haven.

To cease struggling for a time ; to feel, instead of to think ; to merge that personal identity, of which he grew so tired, in the being and happiness of another ; in short, to be a lover instead of a metaphysician. It is irresistible at twenty-one, whatever it may be at fifty ! The emotional must have its time as well as

the purely intellectual, and in youth the heart will reign supreme over the brain ; and so, to his own astonishment, it was with Alick ! The perplexing questions which had seemed to be gradually drawing closer and closer round, half suffocating the soul within him, were for a while at least driven back by the strength of a young and healthy love.

Mr. Scott had always taken an interest in the lad, and always held up his practical common sense as a model to his own boy, much to the disgust of the latter. Of course Percy did not like Alick any the better because of this.

The farmer gave Alick a hearty welcome, therefore, when the young fellow availed himself of Nelly's shy invitation, and as Alick had sense enough not to air any of the wild theories and speculations thought and read of so anxiously, but confined himself to discourses on farming,

game laws, local politics, etc., the older man found him very good company; especially as he was slow of tongue—except when roused to eloquence and energy on rare occasions—and proved a good listener.

Alick was no hypocrite. It was not because he wished to convey a false impression of himself, or was ashamed of his views, that he kept silence on the subjects which interested him most deeply.

But after all what was there to talk about? All his study and thought had as yet brought him to no conclusions whatever. Where was the good of telling people that he did not believe what they did, unless he could also tell them something which he did believe? Things must be brought to an anchor somehow, before they were talked of unrestrainedly, and without choice of suitable audience.

He was only a very young man ; wh~~ere~~ right had he to set up his opinions befor~~e~~ older and presumably wiser men ?

Besides, and this was the best reason of all, he was in love, and he liked best to listen quietly ; for that left him time to watch Nelly as she flitted about the room or sat with her work between her old father and himself ; not taking much part in their talk, but making Alick, when he did speak, glance with pleasure at the bright, interested face she turned towards him. The parlour at Elm-tree Farm was a big, dingy, low-ceilinged room ; with a heavy oak press, and chairs to match ; a huge fireplace, with brass fender and andirons polished brightly by Nelly herself ; and a high chimney-piece adorned with china shepherdesses, spotted dogs, a pair of brass candlesticks, and two or three shells in which Nelly used to “ listen for the sea,” when she was little.

The fresh young beauty of the farmer's daughter showed to advantage in this dull room, which, however, she always managed to make comfortable ; and which she brightened up with sweet spring flowers—perhaps a little more carefully arranged during the brief week of Alick's holiday. Farmer Scott's training had answered with his girl, whatever it had done with Percy.

Nelly did not feel at all injured in having to wash, bake, iron, milk the cows and make the butter ; in fact, being of a quick, energetic disposition, she would have done all these things for mere love of being busy, even had her father not specially wished it. Nelly, with her sleeves rolled up and an apron round her, was as happy in her little realm as a queen ; and sang at her work continually, much to her brother's disgust. He would have had her chafe

and fret, as he did, over their fancie-
degradation.

Poor Percy! It was hard on him, but she really couldn't help feeling happy—though she was sorry for him! You see, men were so different, especially clever, handsome young men like Percy.

For Nelly cherished an ardent admiration for her idle, good-looking brother, and would have given all she possessed to see him more contented and happy. She made excuses for him, and judged his failings by quite a different standard to that which she found applicable to the rest of the world; setting her idol upon a pedestal and hiding his feet of clay even from her own sight, after the manner of foolish, loving, tender women all the world over.

She was sorry he didn't take more to Alick. Alick was so strong, so sensible, and so clever in his own quiet, practical

way, though of course not to be compared to Percy for brilliance. Percy could do anything, if he would try. Alick's steady perseverance might be useful in the way of influence, if only a friendship would spring up between them.

But though Percy said nothing against Alick (as indeed how could he against one who had just saved him from such a horrible injury?) he frowned when Nelly praised her old playmate too warmly, and kept out of the way when he came in the evening.

Nelly was growing very fond of those quiet hours, when her father smoked his pipe after the day's work, and Alick told them of his life and the books he read in his leisure time—some of them, at least; or strolled with her under the trees by the river, when, as seemed to happen pretty often, he met her there on her way to or from the village.

Very sweet was it to watch the sun sink down below the hills, leaving warm, dreamy glow behind ; then to see the stars twinkle out faintly in the darkening sky ; to listen to the last song of the thrush before the hush of night falls over him ; or to hear only the water stealing over the pebbles in the river-bed below. Sweeter still to be together in that lover's silence which is so full of meaning, so powerful in its charm that it seems almost sacrilege to break it.

At such moments Alick forgot the problems of life and death which were troubling him so sorely ; in fact, he would not, dare not, think at all. The present was sufficient—past and future might go, for all he cared.

And yet, even across his dream-hushed mind a thought came with a quick pang now and then. Annihilation. Was such a theory tenable, looking into Nelly's

eyes? Did he wish to believe that she would die, body and soul together; so perfect a creation for so brief an existence?

Could one who loved her rest content that love should be less than immortal? It was profanation to love itself, to think of it as otherwise; and yet—what hope was there for its continuance? None that was satisfactory out of her presence—while in it, none seemed necessary.

CHAPTER XV.

“WHAT do you think of them?” asked Alick Lisle, anxiously, as the school-master laid the last sheet on a pile of manuscript, and rose with a sigh from his seat.

The question seemed a difficult one to answer, for Cameron paced the room a few times before he replied.

“Eh, lad, they’re clever enough, I’ll no deny ye that,” he said, at length; “but can ye no let things gang their own gait? Do ye fancy yourself so strong as to be able to fight the world single-handed—when ye throw down the gauntlet in siccan a fashion?”

And then the speaker glanced at the young and eager face for an answer.

“A man must be willing to risk all for the sake of what he believes to be truth!”

“A *man*? Hear till him! And he a bit bare-fitted callant only a few months syne,” ejaculated the master, his feelings divided between pride in his pupil, and painful surprise at the audacity of the views expressed in the essays he had read. “And who do you expect is going to listen to ye when ye’ve got neither money nor friends to back ye, ye wrong-heided young gowk? They must choose popular truths who mean to live by preaching. Truth indeed? Do ye no mind what Heine says to such speakers o’ truth as ye set up for being. I’ll just gie ye the gist o’t i’ yer mither tongue—

‘Worthy friend, ’twill be perdition
Books like this to think of printing!
Wouldst thou money earn or honour,
Thou must bend in meek submission.

‘Never in this manner flighty,
Shouldest thou before the public,
Thus have spoken of the parsons,
And of monarchs high and mighty !

‘Friend, thou’lt be by all forsaken !
Princes have long arms, the parsons
Have long tongues, and then the public
Have long ears, or I’m mistaken.’”

Alick laughed at this, and then looked grave.

“It’s more than likely you are right,” he said. “The best of my essays have come back to me, declined as unsuitable, by the magazines I tried them for ; while papers I thought nothing of — mere sketches of nature, of the woods and their inhabitants, find a ready acceptance.”

“Stick to them then, Alick, my boy ! What for should you go about raking up the auld queries which have aye bothered the deepest thinkers sin’ ever the warld was ? D’ye think that nane o’ us ever

lichted on them afore? That ye are the verra first that's found no answer to the riddle o' human life and destiny, or the first that's found somethin' far amiss wi' the auld hulk that's bearin' us awa', awa' across the sea o' life intill the ocean o' eternity? Haud yer peace, man, haud yer peace, if ye ha' naethin' better to gie despairin' men than sic' a revelation o' their own dark doots."

It was Alick's turn now to be surprised. He gazed at his companion in astonishment. Never before had he seen Camerou moved so deeply. The old listless manner was gone, and the dreamy eyes were almost passionate in their enthusiasm. Poor Cameron! He clung to his religious beliefs as a frightened child clings to its nurse, hiding his fearful face in her bosom, lest he should see the darkness around him. Alick's outspoken freedom had made him all too conscious of the

weak hold he had on the hopes which served to sustain him.

Alick Lisle was touched by the sight of this emotion; but it was pity, not sympathy, that he felt.

There was, to his mind, something both womanish and contemptible in such faith as this!

Faith? Why, it seemed the very last depth of scepticism! Could worse befall a man than this hoodwinking of his reason; this clinging to a plank, and not daring to hold a light to it lest he should see its rottenness.

Cameron's sensitiveness made him keenly alive to what Alick was thinking. He felt the change of atmosphere, felt that the momentary unveiling of his inner feelings had raised a barrier between himself and his friend; a barrier for which neither was to blame, but which, once raised, neither could for the present over-

step. It lay in the nature of things, that with all their personal regard, full accord was now impossible.

Cameron, perhaps never a very speculative man, was subdued by hard experiences, and a care never absent from him; and had long realized the sorrowful truth that "the thoughts of the wisest are but pertinent questions;" while Alick, in the full vigour of youth, still believed that to him who could interpret the oracle, an answer might be won from the Sphinx—and despite of its awe-inspiring mystery, he yet dared to question it.

A silence fell on the friends after Cameron's outburst. Alick sat vainly endeavouring to reply. It would have been easy enough to do this, had the speaker been one he loved or respected less. Before, however, he could manage to frame a sentence which should not

hurt, while it answered, the schoolmaster conquered his emotion ; and evidently wishing to change the subject, took up again one of Alick's papers, and plunged desperately into a discussion on its contents, which were on quite another question.

So an hour was whiled away, skimming on the surface, as it were, and then Alick took his leave.

Their parting was not less friendly, nor their regret at losing sight of each other one whit less great. Yet each recognized the fact that a great change had passed over the old and happy relationship, and that henceforth there would be a reserve between them, whenever their deepest feelings were moved. Unless, indeed, the years to come should bring a change in those feelings themselves.

Wearily Donald Cameron closed the door after his former pupil, and resting

his head on his hands, leaned on the little table.

The young fellow was going out into the world—going out to fight his way there, and try to make himself a name. For all the heretical views Alick held now, the older man half envied the youthful would-be reformer.

True, he had ceased to believe in a world being created out of chaos by divine fiat; but then, as yet, he found no difficulty in fancying that the moral chaos could be reconstructed into an orderly cosmos! He had ceased to believe in physical miracles; but had apparently still ample faith in the possibility of moral ones. Had no belief left in the self-sacrifice of Calvary; and yet seemed to think the time might come when every man should gain a Christ-like power of self-renunciation.

Meanwhile, it appeared to Cameron,

that even in this very disbelief, the lad had a more passionate sense of duty, a more manly will to do the right, than half the people who imagine they believe in God, because they have never thought on the question at all.

"Thou do'st His will,
The Maker's, and not knowest, and I that know,
. . . Linger with vacillating obedience."

This was what Cameron felt, though he did not manage to express it so well, nor indeed did he express it at all; only there came over him a recognition of the indolence he had been fostering under the name of hopelessness, the faithlessness he had even encouraged, calling it self-distrust.

"The boy despises me, and no wonder!" he thought; and then, after a sad moment or two, he began to awaken mentally. "Is it too late yet to get out of this weary round of duties I have never quite

felt to be duties? Surely, surely I was born for something more than this? And yet for nine years I have gone on day after day the same, well-nigh losing sight of the goal I ought to win—if my life is not to be really the utter failure it seems.”

“Nine years,” he repeated, as he rose, and again paced the floor. “Nine years! Why, at the present rate, it will be twice that before my purpose can be accomplished! Long ere then I will be old and grey; old, and grey, and feeble. Maybe, the blot on the dear old name will never be wiped out after all!”

Once more he seated himself at the table, and, drawing the light towards him, took a memorandum book from the drawer. Was Donald Cameron a miser, then?

It looked almost like it, for he pored over the figures with feverish anxiety, and the little book held the account of

savings for nine years of hard work, and rigorous self-denials. And yet—the result was a pitifully small one—two hundred and a few odd pounds!

With a sigh he put the book away again. The utmost calculation could not make the amount imposing.

But its study that night had clenched a determination in his mind. There was a work for him to do in the world, and God helping him, he meant to do it; but how—that was the question?

One thing only was certain, that it could not be done in the way he now pronounced a failure. Puzzle as he might, there seemed to him only one resource—literature! A forlorn hope, perhaps. One more effort, however, he would make. If it failed, at least he would have done what he could.

“The lad seemed to be a bit touched by them!” he said, thinking of his poems,

and with a pathetic recurrence to his one friend, and a sorrowful longing to dwell on the more sympathetic aspect of his recent talk with Alick.

CHAPTER XVI.

“I WISH you were not going so soon, Alick; I wish, indeed ——” and Nelly hesitated and blushed, afraid of saying too much.

“And so do I, Nelly; I wish I were not going at all!”

They were looking sadly down the river, on the last evening of Alick's holiday.

Nelly threw some bits of broken branches into the water, and watched them float away into the distance.

Why do people always float away like those branches, just when one has grown fond of them? She hadn't meant to care

for Alick, stupid old Alick, but somehow they had been so much together, and he was so much nicer than any one there, that she had grown used to his company. It was all Percy's fault, for leaving them to themselves in that unreasonable manner.

There was a little pain at Nelly's heart, and she resented the hold it had on her.

"You will forget us all in your busy, restless life! You think and read so much, and have so many ambitions apart from our quiet humdrum ones—oh, yes, you have, Alick! I have watched you sometimes, and seen your eyes glow, and heard your voice deepen when things were talked of that poor silly me couldn't understand, and I know you are ambitious!"

"Do you believe in your heart I could ever forget *you*, Nelly?" asked Alick, quietly ignoring the accusation of being ambitious.

“How can I tell?” answered the girl coquettishly, looking at him sideways from under her curved eyelashes.

“Only too well, Nelly, only too well—*darling.*”

Nelly’s hand stole out hesitatingly, and in another moment the young fellow caught it, and pressed a passionate kiss on it. Wild and fervent words came thronging to his lips, but he recovered self-possession before they gained utterance.

With a sigh he let fall the pretty dimpled hand.

“Nelly,” he said, in a voice full of deep and tender love. “I *dare* not tell you how impossible it is that I should ever forget you! A poor, rough, uneducated lad with his way to make in the world, has no right to take advantage of such friendship as you have shown me!” I never wished for money before; never fretted because I would have to work

hard for every step on the road to it, but now—now everything is altered!”

“But I don’t care about you being poor; we can be *friends* all the same!”

Nelly’s voice was almost a whisper, but Alick caught the sweet words, and they made his heart beat quicker. What a loving, generous, unselfish darling she was! He must not stay there longer, or he would not be able to help trying to win her for his own. It was hard to resist, very hard, but Alick was proud. She was young; she could not know her own mind thoroughly yet; and if she should change and reproach him for the liberty she had cast away unknowingly. No, it would never do!

“Thank you, Nelly; thank you a thousand times for those sweet, sweet words. We shall be *friends*, then, until—unless you change!”

Quick tears started to the eyes of the

warm-hearted girl. She thought his voice cold and forced, and did not detect the ring of sadness beneath the subdued tone.

She expected—what did she expect? She knew not, and yet felt a little disappointed. They were to be no more than *friends* after all! She was too simple to hide her pain altogether. She drew closer to Alick, and laid her hand on his arm.

“Alick, I will never change,” she said, impulsively, and lifted her tearful eyes to his. Then Alick caught her tightly to his breast, and kissed the sweet upturned face.

And then raising his head he saw Percy Scott standing before them, white with passion.

“What is the meaning of this?” cried the young man, furiously. “How dare you touch my sister? You surely forget you are only a common keeper?”

Alick did not answer, but he looked the excited lad calmly in the face, and put his arm round Nelly's waist to support her. The girl, who loved her brother, and feared his fits of passion exceedingly, screamed, and hid her face on Alick's shoulder.

With an oath Percy came towards them, and tried to pull Nelly away; but in a moment he was quietly set on one side, foaming and stamping with rage.

When Nelly recovered composure, Alick took away his arm, and stood a little aloof.

"I wouldn't have believed a sister of mine could have so disgraced herself!" began Percy, after a moment to recover breath, but Alick broke in.

"Stop there!" he said, in a voice which showed he did not mean to be trifled with, "there's no question of disgrace, Mr. Percy! If there's blame to

any one it's to me ; but I've no need to ask pardon, save of your sister ! Will you forgive me, Miss Nelly ? " he went on, humbly enough, turning his back on Percy, and addressing the girl he loved. " I know I ought not to have forgotten myself so ; but you'll be good, and forgive me, will you not ? "

" Oh, Alick, don't, you'll break my heart," moaned the girl in answer.

Then Alick turned to Percy.

" I love your sister, Mr. Percy, I'm not going to deny that, but surely you will not call *that* a crime ? A man may love truly and purely, whether he be a lord or only a poor gamekeeper ; and love is not a thing to be ashamed of, if it be pure and true ! But you need not fear that I want to take advantage of her inexperience to bind her in any way to me. I'm over proud for that, though you do look down on me ! I would not have said

this, if you had not talked of disgrace and such like, and forced me to speak out as it were! Do you hear me, Nelly?" and he took the girl's hand, and looked at her with sad, steadfast eyes. "I am yours now, and yours for ever, even though I may not try to make you love me in return! Good-bye now, and be happy, even if happiness means forgetfulness!"

Then he went slowly down the river path, and Nelly saw him no more for many a long day. But he loved her, she knew that now, and she felt strangely, strangely content! Content to dwell on the remembrance of the simple manly way in which he had answered Percy's sneers and anger; and in the recollection of his look so full of love and tenderness; and the memory of the one wild passionate embrace he had given her.

Percy felt a little ashamed of what he

had said, although he resented as much as ever the fact that his sister should be on such terms with a man of inferior station.

But this man had just saved him from a frightful danger !

Well, had it not been for this he should have answered for his conduct in a very different manner ; but then he, Percy, felt to a certain degree tongue-tied !

The fellow presumed upon it, doubtless !

Percy fancied he had seen this in Alick's manner, never dreaming that it was the last thing to run in the mind of such a man. Alick's perfectly healthy nervous organization prevented him dwelling on the narrow escape he had had, or setting an undue value on his own courage ; which he simply accepted as part of his nature, and not much more admirable than memory or perception. But poor, nervous, excitable Percy, who

never went to sleep for weeks after, without starting up in bed, thinking he saw the awful foaming mouth, and heard the snap of the iron jaws, could not imagine the small impression produced on his preserver; and utterly failed to gauge the motive of Alick's hardihood and coolness in asserting his right to love, and to speak of his love as a thing of which no man need to be ashamed.

CHAPTER XVII.

How fresh everything looked at Elm-tree Farm in the sweet spring-time! The sunset hues were tinging the sky one afternoon, just before spring had ripened into early summer.

The grass was springing a brighter green, the hedges were covered with myriads of newly opened leaflets, and daisies and buttercups gemmed the fields with their white and gold. Everything spoke of hope—hope that from the sleep of winter, had arisen young and refreshed with the awakening of the earth. A thrush was singing in one of the great elm-trees overhanging the road, choosing

apparently only his softest and most liquid tones, in harmony with the quiet charm of the place and the hour.

Some cows in a field near the house, seemed quite alive to the fact that milking time had come, for they were restless ; and Cherry, the red and white one, threw back her head and moo-ed loudly enough to be heard at the farm. There was no doubt she considered herself aggrieved by being kept waiting, even though she was the most provoking of cows to milk, declining to stand still, and attempting to kick over the pail when mischievously inclined.

But Nelly Scott knew her business well, and would stand no nonsense of that kind ! She knew when to coax and when to be cross, and Cherry acknowledged this power by utterly refusing to let any one else come near to milk her.

Presently Nelly came with the herd-boy

to drive the cows into the byre. Surely she was the blithest and most idyllic of milk-maids, as she tripped across to the pasture, humming a snatch of an old ballad as she went? Trim and neat she was, in a brightly flowered print, tucked up, thereby displaying well turned ankles, and sleeves rolled above her round dimpled arms.

Not impossibly beautiful by any means, for the fair face under the lilac sun-bonnet had been touched a little too warmly by the sun in places; but the brown eyes were full of life, and the lips soft and red, with cunning dimples in their corners.

Nelly was happy, spite of her separation from Alick, and the fact that she had begun to love him; the influence of the bright spring-time made her spirits buoyant and hopeful.

But for some created things there is no

spring, no hope, no awakening to anything but sorrow and repentance !

A sad-looking figure, crouched on a heap of stones by the road-side, jarred on the rest of the picture. She must have walked far, for she limped sadly before she sat down, as if her feet were cut and blistered through the miserable boots ; her clothes—a mere mass of rags—were dusty and soiled. She seemed too tired to stir, but leaned a weary head down upon clasped hands, as though the brightness and the happiness of the world were a contrast too bitter to be borne.

As Nelly crossed the road, however, the tramp raised her face, and a pair of wild haggard eyes looked eagerly at the bonny country lass. Then the woman started half up, and gave a quick gasping cry, holding out her hands as though imploring notice. The girl was looking straight ahead, however, and did not see

the impulsive gesture, and the woman sank down again, following the graceful figure with strange, excited looks.

“I know it is—yes, it *is* Nelly!” she said, under her breath. “Such a pretty baby as she was—and now, a beauty, that’s certain!”

Still she watched, while Nelly called the cows by their names, and they came at her bidding, and allowed the boy to drive them through the gate.

Then, as they drew near, the tramp rose and stood in the road, a miserable, dejected-looking figure, yet with a certain grace of attitude which hinted that in the far gone time, this poor creature might have been pleasant to look upon; perhaps—who knows—a lady?

“I wonder if I dare speak to her?” she murmured. “I long to hear her voice, and have her eyes meet mine, and yet—oh, I dare not, I dare not!” and with a groan she drew back.

“Another of those wretched beggars,” thought Nelly, compassionately, stopping at the sight of such evident distress. “Poor soul, how ill she looks. Worn out and hungry, I dare say. I’ll send Molly to her with something to eat and drink, for Mrs. Brown won’t have them in the kitchen, soiling her clean floor with their muddy feet; but perhaps I had better speak to her myself!”

“Have you walked far, you poor thing?” she said, gently. “I’m sure you’re both tired and hungry, aren’t you now?”

The soft, silvery tones fell like balm upon the ear of the listener. An expression of love and yearning crept over the worn face, transfiguring it for a moment into youth and beauty.

“Yes, miss, tired enough, and hungry enough, too, for that matter; but not so tired and hungry that your pity doesn’t

do more for me than meat, drink, or rest!" was the strange answer Nelly got to her question.

The girl opened her bright eyes wider and stared. Was the woman mad? The voice and accent were refined, too, which made it all the stranger.

"How pretty you are—how sweet—how good!" exclaimed the tramp. "Why do you draw away from me as though you were afraid?" she went on with a half laugh. "Afraid of *me*, that would be too much, when I have walked over two hundred miles only to see you once more, my——!" Here the woman stopped short, catching her breath, as though she were betraying more than she meant to do. "I'm thirsty, miss, that's what I am," she continued, after a minute, trying to recover self-possession. "Maybe, you'd be kind enough to give me a drink of water. I'll be able to

touch her hand then, anyway," this to herself, as Nelly, with a nod of acquiescence, went off to the house for a mug of milk.

Presently the girl returned, the milk in one hand, a plate of bread and meat in the other. With a cry of delight the woman took the welcome drink, lingering as their hands touched. Then suddenly seizing Nelly's, as the girl withdrew it, she lifted it to her lips, and pressed passionate kisses on it.

Nelly stood amazed at such excess of gratitude. It was not usual in that class !

Then Farmer Scott, on his way to see his stock before nightfall, drew near, and stood looking at them with a keen questioning gaze.

All at once he gave a start, and, striding forward, drew Nelly aside roughly.

"My God, it's *you* then! Did you think that I shouldn't know you, miserable drab as you are?" he cried. Then, glancing at Nelly, the man bit his lip and frowned. "Nelly, my lass, it's all very well bein' kind to beggar folks, but thou shouldst mind that thy cows are waitin' to be eased o' their milk, poor beasts! Go now, and I'll see what the woman needs myself."

Nelly's curiosity was fairly roused; first by the peculiar behaviour of the tramp, then by her father's hasty words. So she went off slowly, wondering much what it could mean. But in a few minutes the mystery was half forgotten. Nelly had no time to spare in her healthy mind for the guessing of insolvable riddles.

"Now, woman, what have *you* come back for? It cannot be for good, so I may know the evil, that I may guard against it," said Mr. Scott, sternly.

The woman did not answer. She seemed afraid to look at him, but an expression of obstinacy gathered about her mouth.

“What sort of life are you leading that you dare touch and kiss that innocent girl of mine?”

“Have I not a right?” blazed out the woman, fiercely. “Who has a better right than me?”

“Silence!” interrupted Mr. Scott. “It is too late to talk in that way now! If you ever had a right, it was lost when—you know *when* well enough!”

“What has brought you to this?” he went on more softly after a moment, as he took in all the forlorn, wretched appearance of the figure before him.

“Poverty, misery, sorrow, sin, drink!” was answered, sullenly. “Did you think to find me rolling in a carriage, wrapped up in silks and velvets? No, no, the

devil doesn't give such good wages now-a-days. I can tell you that! He finds labour cheaper!" and she wound up with a bitter laugh.

Mr. Scott gave a shudder of utter loathing and disgust. He knew he ought to say something to soften the hard heart, and show that though the sin is never so black, there is still hope for the sinner; but he could not force the words to his lips. There was less of pity than of anger in his heart, and he knew it! At last he murmured some commonplace about repentance. Then for the first time the woman raised her eyes to his, and looked him steadily in the face.

"Do you really wish me to repent, John Scott?" she said, quietly. "What does the world do with people that repent, when they've gone as far wrong as I have? Are they taken back to the bosom of their families, and is the best

robe given, and the fatted calf killed for them, as for the prodigal son in the old story? That's all very well in the Bible, John Scott, but you and I know better when it comes to real life, don't we? Besides, prodigal sons and Mary Magdalens are different people, aren't they? It was only Christ who could afford to forgive *her*. I would like to have heard her friends' account of the matter—whether they, respectable, God-fearing folks as I suppose they'd be—liked having such a come-down in the eyes of their neighbours? ”

“There's others to be considered in your case,” Mr. Scott said, hesitatingly, looking down on the ground as he spoke. “Others, innocent and well brought up, who cannot afford to set public opinion at defiance, and might suffer, too, from association with——” Here he stopped.

“With a miserable wretch, too far gone

for hope!" wailed the woman, whose fierce mood had apparently passed away; for she hid her face in her hands, and rocked herself to and fro; her whole body shaking with wild, hysterical sobs, which she tried hard to suppress.

"Oh, God! why did I ever live to come back, if there is no hope? why did He not strike me dead before the first evil thought came, if He is what they say, full of mercy and love?"

Mr. Scott glanced up and down the road anxiously. Luckily there was no one to witness this strange wild scene. He really did not know what to do! The poor man was at his wit's end. He was sorry, very sorry, for the miserable outcast; but he would have given half his year's income had she never come there.

"I will willingly help you as far as money goes," he said, slowly. "Wait

here a few minutes, and I will see what can be done ! ”

Vague plans were floating through his brain as he went off to the house. There were charitable institutions for such as these ; was there any possibility of getting her into one of them ?

He did not believe much in repentance for sins like hers, but still, such things have been ! At any rate, it was worth while trying. Anything was better than having such a terrible, wicked, tragic story brought out into the light of day after all these calm years !

And Percy, wilful, handsome, pleasure-loving Percy ; and Nelly, his bright, good little lass, so like his own dead mother, as he loved to think ; who took after his family in fact—it would not do—not to be thought of.

As soon as he left her the woman rose to her feet. “ As if I would take *his*

money," she said, bitterly, drawing herself together; and even in her rags looking like some wreck of what was once a gentlewoman. "He might have spared me that at least! As for the rest, he's right enough, I know, however hard it seems—but oh, my little ones! how had I the heart to leave them?"

When Mr. Scott came back, the woman was no longer to be seen. As she had come, so she had gone, leaving no trace behind, save that the farmer's face grew gloomy and stern, when he sat silently thinking, afterwards.

"Maybe it's for the best, after all," he murmured, when he was satisfied that she had really gone. "It seems a bit hard, but what could one ha' done with such a woman as that?"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE resolution formed the night Cameron bade Alick Lisle good-bye, had taken root, and for some weeks afterwards the little gossiping village post-office noted the fact that bulky packages were sent through it, to sundry great publishing houses in London. Then, a day at length coming when a few poems were accepted and paid for by a well known monthly magazine, the poor fellow seemed to get a new start in life.

The old hopes and ambitions, which had been lying dormant since they were stunned by a crushing blow some ten years before, revived in him.

Once more he believed in himself, and in the possibility of success.. And with the success would come the attainment of a purpose infinitely more dear to him than any merely selfish ambition. He had lived so long without hope ; or without any word of encouragement to comfort his wounded heart, and quench his thirst for recognition ; that the first draught of success, small as it was, intoxicated him.

He gathered up the poems that had lain neglected for years, and the random fragments thrown aside unfinished ; and wrought and elaborated them with a feverish energy which to himself seemed like the true poetic fire, and which had in truth a spark of something akin to genius.

In happier circumstances the man might perhaps have been a really successful writer of verses—a poet, in the highest

sense, he could never have become. For that he lacked the power to believe in and be carried away by his own inspirations; also perhaps the intense sympathy which nature only gives to her favoured ones. But there was in him the tender sensitiveness, the morbid subjectivity, above all, the child-like simplicity which so often accompany the gift. But, alas! this is also given sometimes when the true thing is denied, or bestowed in but a limited form.

However, be all this as it may, Donald Cameron was for the time being inspired, and under the influence of this inspiration or intoxication, he resolved on a bold move. He would draw all his little savings, and like any young enthusiastic boy, go up to London to seek his fortune.

London! The very word had a charm in it to one so rustic and unsophisticated as the Fordham schoolmaster. There

was room for all there, or why should genius always gravitate to the big city? Surely there he would find some kindly honest publisher who would lend him a helping hand, and bring out his little book.

He thought with simple contentment that he had enough to live on, until such time as he should make himself a name.

“A name!” He shivered a little at the phrase that he had so unthinkingly used, and then he raised his head. “Well, and why not? If he could make that name famous, who would dare to challenge it?”

“Eh, but he was a canny, quiet body, and never did an ill turn to nobody!” said one gossip to another, when Donald Cameron turned his back upon Fordham for ever.

“He was that,” assented the listener readily, “and though one never he

tell on't at the time, he did many a bit o' good in a quiet way; and as for hearin' his name mentioned, there's nobody been less talked of, see ye!"

In this speech was a shrewd recognition of the fact that if you did not hear a man's name mentioned in Fordham, you might rest assured that there was no evil to tell of him.

"And he turned out a few grand scholars, and no mistake; a lang way better than this auld chap will, I'll warrant, though he carries his head so high; there's no getting a look at him! Ay, ay, for all Mr. Cameron wasn't one to set hisself off, I would wager he's forgotten mair nor this one's ever learned!"

The other woman shook her head solemnly.

"Larned or not, he thinks gey muckle o' hisself," she said, disapprovingly, for if there is one thing more than another

that Fordham folks hate, it is self-conceit; "but I for one think nowt o' them bodies that darena' laugh chance they should let theirsels down. Wey, auld Grey luiks as solemn as a grave-stone!"

For now that Donald Cameron was gone the villagers found out that they had lost something; and that in their own way they had grown fond of the gaunt and distant, but soft-voiced and sweet-mannered schoolmaster. After the fashion of rural places, they forgot all past strictures upon him; and were quite disposed to draw comparisons between him and his successor, entirely to the latter's disadvantage.

The estimate formed so speedily was, it must be confessed, a tolerably accurate one.

A glance at the closely-shaven, hard-featured face of the new schoolmaster,

with its thin compressed lips and cold unresponsive eyes, sufficed to show that the man was the centre of his own social system; while the long pointed chin hinted pretty strongly of obstinacy—or firmness, as its owner would have called it; and the slow, high-pitched voice seemed to claim a right to be heard before all other sounds of the universe.

Nor was the comparison to a tombstone altogether an unhappy one, for Adam Grey preached of wisdom quite as solemnly, and was as little permeated by it.

His favourite proverb was, “Little pleases little minds,” and from this he naturally argued that since nothing either big or little gave him much pleasure, it must be because his mind was proportionately great.

Not at all an illogical conclusion from the premises. But in all the wisdom

which has come down from the ancients in the form of proverbs, is there any more utterly false than this of the new school-master?

CHAPTER XIX.

BUT if the rough and ready wit of the country folk suffice to render clear to them the leading characteristics of the new schoolmaster, it none the less failed utterly to decipher the more delicately expressed individualities of the young girl whom he brought with him, and who was soon known to be his daughter.

Their simple lore might enable them to read an almanac or a newspaper ; but it could not be expected to be equal to understanding or appreciating the beauties of a poem, or the exquisite suggestions of a symphony ; and in some degree at least Esther Grey resembled both of these.

How the hard, matter-of-fact old man happened to have such a child was a mystery—only nature would appear to be not a little fond of such mysteries.

A tall, well-proportioned figure, but as yet so slim and girlish that its delicate curves and subtle harmonies were entirely thrown away on the youth of the village, accustomed as they were to a coarser, more accentuated style of feminine physique. Nor did the small oval face, with its pale clear loveliness, impress them. The broad low brow, over which the dark hair lay in softly waving lines; the long black lashes, fringing the eyes, and throwing their liquid blue into shadow—mysterious and beautiful as a mountain loch in twilight—what charm had these when compared with Susan Jane's rosy cheeks, reddish hair, and plump figure?

None, of course; so at village dance

or flower-show the new comer was left unattended.

Nor were her own sex more attracted by her. She had no sweethearts to talk of, no bright trinkets or ribbons to display; and, what was still worse, evinced no interest in their tales of conquest, or displays of finery.

Cold and proud and distant they voted the young girl, as they saw her wandering off for a lonely walk by the river-side in an evening. One or two who had come across her there, were half inclined to set her down as a little wrong in the head. She would sit for hours motionless, watching the water flow by, lulled apparently into a sort of dream; now and then she would idly throw a leaf or twig into the current, and follow it with her gaze as it floated away out of sight with a strange intentness; as though in some way the very hopes of her life were

bound up in it; and if it surmounted the breakers, and reached the placid waters beyond, she would give a sigh of infinite relief.

Who in their senses would behave like that?

Then, too, only look at the way she would sit in the little garden, when the sunset was fading; her work fallen from her hands, her lips parted and her breast heaving with a dim longing she could find no words for! And had she not been seen, after standing with clasped hands listening, like one in an ecstasy, to the liquid notes of a lark's song, to throw herself suddenly down on the grass, and sob as if her heart would break?

And yet the schoolmaster's daughter taught their children to knit and sew and darn as no other mistress had ever done; and strange to say, although she

never joined in their frolics, and seldom caressed them, the little ones all loved her, and hung round her chair in the school most affectionately.

The cottage home was daintily kept also, and the old man, her father, "neat as a new pin;" though how such a dreamy, dawdling maid ever managed to do all this was a thing the gossips could not understand.

It was an unutterably lonely life, this led by Esther Grey.

Adam Grey, a hard-headed, cold-hearted old bachelor, had suddenly taken a fancy—when considerably on the wrong side of forty—to marry a girl in her teens. She was soft and yielding and womanly, and for these qualities he married her. Not that he loved her much, even for them; but he thought such material would mould well in his hands.

So, day by day he tried to shape the

tender, loving little soul to his own pattern ; denying it the sunshine it craved and the love it needed ; until at last the fragile flower faded and died, every tendril being pruned away, and nothing given to support and cling to. But, rather to his horror, she left behind a still more delicate blossom for him to rear.

One would have thought that, having found the hardening process so little of a success, the man would have tried a more kindly one ; but no, Adam Grey was never wrong, and his theories must be carried out, whatever it cost.

The child took root, lived, grew, and, in some degree, at least, followed her own bent, even in that unkindly soil.

“Little girls should be seen and not heard !”

So the merry prattle and the fresh laughter of childhood must needs be hushed in his hearing. But the little

one would creep away to the brook ; and as it went gurgling away over its moss-grown stones, she too laughed out in low soft tones for sympathy. So it came that her rare laughter echoed the music of the rippling water.

“ He couldn’t have other children about, making a noise ! ”

She had no toys to help her to bear the loneliness, but there was always the flowers. Capital playthings they made for the solitary child. A daisy turned upside down, with a forget-me-not stuck on its stalk for a bonnet, made a sweet little doll, its pink-tipped petals forming the skirt of the dress very nicely. And what wonderful plays these flower puppets rehearsed, their miniature stage the palm of Esther’s tiny hand.

Years after, she told these pretty fancies shyly ; and added, with a blush, that she never tidied her little work-basket with-

out putting the bobbins and thimbles into pairs, "for fear they should be lonely, like me."

Adam Grey was perfectly contented with his daughter. Quiet, domesticated, and gentle, he saw in her the embodiment of conventional maidenhood, and took great credit to himself for having brought her up so wisely.

"None of the nonsense about her there is in the most of girls," he would say, as he praised her coolly enough to his particular cronies. She was his own, part of his goods and chattels, and therefore of course she was perfect. Had *he* not formed her?

For his position, old Grey was rather a learned man, but he held old-fashioned ideas of the subjects suited to the feminine intellect ; so, beyond a little reading, writing, and rudimentary arithmetic, the girl was taught nothing. One treasure,

however, she had, an old and worn copy of Shakespeare ; and from earliest childhood she had pored over this with intense delight. The "Midsummer Night's Dream" first attracted her babyish fancy ; then, year by year, she unconsciously marked her growth by finding herself able to appreciate and love one after another of the great poet's creations.

Her father never troubled himself about her amusements. As for this fancy—"why, he had read Shakespeare himself, and had seen very little in him to make such a fuss over ; but women were different. He might suit them better."

He, of course, never dreamt that his little Esther, growing from childhood into womanhood, was learning to pity like Miranda, sympathize like Desdemona, worship like Helena, perchance even to love like poor, luckless Ophelia.

From the poet she learnt, alas ! nothing

of modern conventionalism ; nothing of how a woman must wait until she is quite sure of love before she gives a grain of the precious article herself ; how Ferdinand must nowadays show his princely establishment as well as his princely heart, before fair Miranda's modesty can condescend to give him the smallest encouragement.

Instead of this, she learnt from him that woman, the truer woman she is, loves for love's sweet sake ; and knows but to love the more in poverty, sickness, or contempt.

Hour after hour, month after month, she waited for the love she felt must come to her. Whether or no that love would be a happy one, whether or no she should win love to herself, she knew not ; only this she felt sure of, that one day some one would come to her who would prove all that Hamlet was to

Ophelia, Demetrius to Helena, Romeo to Juliet.

But then, again, this made her sigh. These women were all beautiful, and she knew not her own loveliness. But in one thing she would surpass them all, and that should be in her power of loving.

Lost in such sweet unreal dreams, the girl had no eyes for the one faithful affection which she had won all unconsciously.

Strange, that her refined beauty should be invisible to all the country swains but one, and that he should be the most uncouth and uncivilized amongst them.

Dick Hepple, mole-catcher by profession, and ne'er-do-weel by general consent, had never been known to care a straw for a woman in his life, though his strapping figure, and comely sunburnt face had won

many an encouraging glance from the country lasses. No sooner, however, had he set eyes on Esther Grey's sweet pale face, than he was conquered at once.

That she never noticed him he knew full well; that she was not for him he knew likewise; but he asked for nothing more than to be allowed to serve her, and, like some rough but faithful dog, be amply paid with a kind look or word. The days when she allowed him to carry her a pail of water from the well, or a faggot of dry wood from the plantation, were days of supreme delight to the poor fellow; although she would take the service simply as a queen the homage due to her, and never once dreamt that it was done from love.

What could a creature like this be to her? Nothing more than Caliban was to Miranda in her enchanted island, a

puppet to do her will, fetch and carry, saw wood and draw water, and when done with to be thrown aside like a worn-out glove. Poor Dick!

CHAPTER XX.

How did they meet, and how did they grow to know each other so well, that the plantation by the old disused mill seldom saw a fair evening without their meeting there? Who can tell the growth of such a fond, foolish passion as that between Percy Scott and dreamy Esther, the schoolmaster's daughter?

He made his fishing-rod an excuse for idling away a lot of time in summer, and every one knows that fishing is very exhausting work, especially when a pair of sweet blue eyes are watching the fisher.

Esther came to the wood to read in

perfect quiet the poetry she knew her father only half approved. What is simpler and more natural than their meeting and their growing fond of each other ?

Esther was only waiting for a Ferdinand to her Miranda ; and when Percy's dark eyes flashed admiring looks at her, how could she help fancying, like her prototype ?

“ There's nothing ill can dwell in such a temple,
If the ill spirit have so fair a house,
Good things will strive to dwell with it.”

After the coarse, ruddy faces of the village lads, Percy's rich olive-tinted complexion and slight, graceful figure seemed refinement itself ; and then, no one knew better than the farmer's son how to assume a fine scorn of all the common people and their ways, which jarred upon his super-sensitive mind.

He, too, was waiting for his ideal

beauty to appear; idleness, discontent, and youth combined to make him ready to accept Esther as this ideal; then she was so unlike every other girl he had seen.

He had had no opportunity to fall in love before; there really was no one there he could for a moment dream of. He, at least, could see the charm of the soft, downcast eyes; the delicately cut features; the rippling silky tresses. At first it was simply an artistic admiration for these attributes which made him seek Esther's society. It was a treat even to look on as a beautiful picture or statue! He liked to watch the wild-rose bloom steal over the pale face at his approach, the light come into the dreamy eyes as they were lifted to his own. But with so young and ardent a nature as Percy's, it could not be expected that this interest should continue merely artistic.

Soon the personal charm of the girl began to do its work. He longed to be near her, because so only did he feel happy or content.

He felt fiercely jealous of every one who dared to look at her ; he wanted her all to himself, for his own absolute possession, like his horse or his dog.

As they grew more intimate, Esther began shyly to talk of all the things she held sacred ; and as the light of her poetic fancy was shed over what she talked of, a new world seemed to open before the young fellow's mind. He had read poetry himself, and liked it, but only as he liked the flowers and the sunshine ; he dared not say he understood it. Even now it was not so much the ideal he grew to care for, as that it served to enhance the charm of the real.

While Esther talked to him he was thinking more of the beautiful curves her

lips took, and the way her expression varied, than what the subject of her conversation happened to be.

When he read poetry to her, he took care to choose all the most impassioned bits, and put his own feelings into his voice. Love was teaching him to be poetic, no doubt ; but love as yet had not taught him to be unselfish.

Weak, lazy, frivolous, with no serious purpose in life save to get through it as easily as possible, how could poor, foolish Esther mistake him for a hero? Alas, that sort of question is more often asked than answered! There is a craving to love in a woman's heart, which makes her deceive herself only too easily ; and once started with the idea that the object of her love is worthy, what, save time and a bitter awakening, can convince her to the contrary?

And of course Percy kept his best

qualities uppermost when with the girl he wished to attract. And he must have had many winning ones, or Nelly, his sister, brought into constant contact with him, would never have loved him so fondly.

He knew, at all events, how to win a woman's sympathy; knew when to appeal for pity, and when to ask for help; when to confess weakness, and when to assume a manly fortitude under undeserved troubles!

And then he was so handsome! Troubles, which would not have been particularly touching if they had happened to a plain and ordinary-looking being, assumed a different aspect entirely, when they were told in that mellow pleading voice, and those dark, poetic eyes looked appealingly for consolation.

Esther at any rate had no heart to deny him her pity when he asked for it;

that pity which is so dangerously akin to a warmer sentiment. He haunted her thoughts in a way that boded ill for her peace of mind ; all her heroes began to have soft dark eyes, and voices of dreamy sweetness.

So day by day they met (as friends, they said), and day by day their love, though undeclared, was gaining strength.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE old mill was an ill-omened place for a tryst. It was shunned by the villagers when evening shadows darkened the gloom of the overhanging fir-trees, for it bore the reputation of being haunted.

A fond and foolish miller in days gone by, had drowned himself in his own mill-dam for love ; and superstitious folks said that he might still be seen wandering uneasily about his old dwelling-place, sitting looking into the water, or wildly throwing up his arms and crying—"False, false, all false !"

Whatever truth there might be in these rumours, it was certain that a more

desolate, deserted-looking place could not be found than the half-ruinous mill, with its great wheel overgrown with mosses and lichens.

Percy, although by no means strong-minded enough to be above superstition, was not sorry that this should be the case; he knew that it kept prying eyes away; and made his secret safer from tell-tale tongues.

Had his father got to know the way these summer evenings were spent, it would have been good-bye to sweet Esther, and all those stolen hours of delicious idleness; for old Scott was one whose word was made law to his household, and Percy knew instinctively that his flirtation with the schoolmaster's daughter would not meet parental approval.

In the first place, the boy was too young to marry; and, if old enough, ought to know how to keep, before he tried to

win, a wife. Then, if the old man was not ambitious in the matter of position, he was so in the matter of money. He had been a lucky man all his life, as far as financial speculations went, and the handsome fortune he inherited had grown steadily and surely.

His handsome Percy ought to marry well. He would quite have endorsed the "Northern farmer's" advice, "Doänt thee marry for munny, but goä wheer munny is !"

Esther was like all dreamy maids, superstitious to the core. But then, for her, the mysterious and the supernatural had a strange fascination. She would not have exchanged that still, dreamlike place for a more commonplace one, though bright and cheerful by comparison.

Her love received an additional charm from its association with this world of the past ; it served to throw an added glamour

of romance over it; and gave the girl still more material out of which to weave her pretty but unreal fancies. If sometimes a shiver passed over her, it was not a painful one; and there was a delicious certainty of Percy's soothing, reassuring words coming after.

So when she crept timorously along by the little path through the wood, if her heart beat loudly, and her breath came quickly as she passed under the shadows of the great trees, she never hesitated nor thought of turning back; for was not her friend, her hero, waiting there for her, idly dropping pebbles into the mill-pond, and counting the minutes until she appeared?

Not even yet had they spoken the love which filled their hearts, needing but a touch to set them in a blaze.

At last came one late October day, when sad brown leaves hung limp and scattered on the trees, or strewed the

woodland paths with a richly tinted carpet.

As Esther, who was first at the meeting place, stood watching the dark water flow rapidly past, swollen with heavy rains ; a feeling of intense sadness came over her, and tears came slowly stealing down her cheeks.

Winter was coming, coming swiftly, and the happy twilight hours were shortening. It was little past six o'clock now, and look how the darkness was deepening. What excuse could she make—could they make to meet after this ? And she loved him so ; yes, she knew it now well enough ; she had given him all her foolish, passionate heart. Did he love her as truly ?

Ah, how was she to know that ? He had never told her so, though by a thousand signs she fancied she knew it. But perhaps it was all a mistake ? No,

no, it was only this dreary place casting its spell of misery over her ! Why had they chosen such a spot as this to meet in ? True lovers—lovers fated to be happy and fortunate in their love—would have fled from it. How she wished now she had never come. With an entirely new terror she looked around her. Black and ruinous loomed the great mill house, and the firs behind it were tossing their gaunt branches in a wind not felt below them.

Where, oh, where was her lagging lover ?

With a terrible cry of fear, she fell prone on the ground, and covered her face, as a dark figure came from the direction of the mill ; advancing slowly towards her.

“ Why, Esther, Esther, darling, what ails you ? ” and Percy—for it was he the timorous girl had taken for the phantom

of the place—raised her half-fainting from the ground.

“ Oh, Percy, I was so afraid. Thank God you are come,” and in her relief she clung to him, and made no secret of her gladness.

It was pleasant to have her clinging there, and to pet and soothe and cherish the tender, soft, frightened creature, until she forgot her fears and smiled in his face confidently. Pleasant, but dangerous! His arm stole round her waist, and her head lay on his shoulder. The contact thrilled him, and made him so far forget his character of “*friend*,” that he stooped to look into her eyes, and when their glances met the tale was told at once. A passionate kiss on the ruddy lips followed as a matter of course.

Where was Esther’s fear, and pain, and sadness now? She knew she was loved, and fancied it was with as true and pure

and unselfish a passion as her own, and so was happy; ecstatically happy as it was in her nature to be—as it was also in her nature to be proportionably wretched.

What matter that the wind, coming down from its ethereal heights, sobbed wildly and wailingly now through the trees, as though it sung a dirge or moaned a warning? Esther only clung the closer to her lover for it. Percy was hers, and she was Percy's, that was enough to make her bliss, however the storm might threaten and rage.

But as they lingered over their good-night, as lovers will, suddenly a weird doleful cry mingled with the howling of the wind, and was repeated again and again. Esther started nervously and shuddered; while Percy drew her closer. "You foolish child—it's only an owl; what did you think it was?"

"I know, Percy; but haven't you heard

the people in the village say it is unlucky—and oh, darling, if it should be an omen of ill now, of all times ! ”

“ Let this be an omen of good, then,” he said, “ and this and this,” kissing her as he spoke, and smiling brightly ; her fears had no effect on him at all events.

But when they separated, still the dreary cry came at intervals through the darkness, and a strange foreboding took possession of the girl’s heart, and shadowed the rapture of her love, even in the first hour of its being assured to her.

CHAPTER XXII.

DICK HEPPLE's deep but shy devotion to Esther, if not expressed in words, took many queer roundabout ways of telling its story, though the girl herself was too preoccupied to read it.

Roots of rare ferns and mosses, or beautiful and uncommon wild flowers, were laid on the window-sill of the school-house; because the uncouth adorer knew such things were cared for by the school-master's daughter. Once he had brought her what he himself fancied a gift worth having, namely, a pair of tame ferrets; but on his producing the creatures from

his capacious pockets, Esther's terror and disgust had been so great that Dick had turned tail, and did not come near again for some time.

A blackbird, which with great care and perseverance he had taught to whistle tunes, was better received ; until one day the fancy struck the girl, that a cage would be unbearable to herself ; when she immediately began to pity the bird so much that any pleasure in it was gone, when she returned it to the giver, with an explanation of her reason.

Dick could not understand ; but he knew enough to see that such fine feelings only set her farther from him ; and so when Geordie Watson, the cobbler, offered him five shillings for the bird, he took it ; and immediately went and got drunk on the money.

It was during the fit of sullen remorse and self-contempt following this, that

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Dick experienced the greatest blow to his affection.

He dared not go near Esther ; dared not meet her pure dreamy eyes ; and yet something irresistibly drew him to haunt her steps ; to be in some way within the radius of her influence.

Some time she might need a strong arm to help and protect her, and then—why, then would be *his* chance, he said doggedly to himself.

In the mean time to see in the distance her dress fluttering as she walked ; to linger where she lingered ; to follow in her footsteps ; and in the darkness to watch her shadow on the window-blind, made Dick as contented as any stupid faithful dog, to whom his mistress's mere presence is happiness sufficient.

But on a late November day, Dick had been mole-catching in Squire Sutton's fields ; and taking a short cut home

came through the plantation by the old mill.

Little did Dick care for its evil reputation. Though he had all the superstition of his class, it was not when out on the moors or in the woods that he ever felt afraid; for his calling had familiarized him with solitude there; and the strange sounds of animal and insect life were all well known to him.

He didn't like being shut up within the four walls of a house, to be sure, and hearing old wives' tales about presentiments and warnings, or such like; much of that would make him crazy, he felt certain.

But here it was different. The trees hanging over the stream; the water gurgling and rippling on its way; the gloom of the twilight, were things he knew well, and therefore did not stand in awe of. He watched the water for a

while, and the noise lulled him into a sleepy state.

He had walked a long distance that afternoon. So he turned into the half-ruinous house belonging to the mill, and finding a heap of mouldy straw in one corner, threw himself down on it, and in three minutes was fast asleep.

He might have slept half an hour or so, when the figure of a man came sauntering along the path by the dam; and entering just within the doorway of the house, struck a match there, lighted a cigar, and stood, apparently waiting.

After some little time of smoking quietly, the cigar was thrown hastily away, and the young fellow, going forward, clasped the one he was waiting for to his breast.

“ My darling, my Esther, how long you have been ! ” he murmured reproachfully.

“I thought you were never coming.”

“I had such difficulty to get away, and now I dare not stay long,” said the girl hurriedly. “Oh, Percy, is it right, do you think?—for us to meet like this, I mean?” and Esther Gray looked timidly into her lover’s face. She dared not think of what her life would be if he dropped out of it, and yet if harm should come to him ——?

Already her father had begun to grumble at her long absences; and now that the winter was coming, the only time she would have would be the occasional evenings when he went to join his cronies in a glass at the Black Bull, where he was a sort of little autocrat.

If once he should begin to suspect any other cause than a dreamy sentimental fancy for her love of solitary walks, Esther knew he would soon find out the truth.

She shuddered at the idea of having to face his wrath; but she shuddered a thousand times more at the possibility of losing Percy.

The young man gave a light laugh at her scruples, and blew them away as easily as one blows off the gossamers of an autumn morning.

“You little Puritan! What harm are we doing any one, I wonder?” and he drew her nearer to him, and kissed the rosy lips into happy silence.

The low murmuring voices fell on the ear of Dick Hepple, and he stirred uneasily in his sleep.

Men like him have all their senses rendered preternaturally acute by constant use in watching; and when Esther laughed her low musical little laugh at something Percy said which struck her sense of humour, Dick was wide awake in a moment. He sat up and took off his

rabbit-skin cap, and rubbing his eyes, bent forward in a listening attitude.

He surely knew that laugh, for it made his heart beat more quickly, and throbbed through his head like music.

Yes; *she* had laughed like that once when he had tried to pay her a compliment, and could only stammer and look foolish instead! Was it possible?

Long the lovers loitered in the doorway of the desolate mill; but at last—ay, at last they parted, with a lingering fond good-bye, and a whispered promise to meet again.

Then Dick Hepple crept out from his lair of mouldy straw, and stood in a dazed, helpless sort of state. His face was white and drawn, and his teeth were clenched.

All at once he stooped and picked up something from the ground. It was a dainty little cigar-case, with a monogram

embroidered upon the back. He turned it over in his hands, and an evil light glittered in his deep-set eyes.

“I’ll keep it; ay, I’ll keep it, anyway. It puts him i’ my hands, the sneakin’, soft-spoken, underhand, fine gentleman that he is !”

When Nettle, Dick’s dog (who had been absent without leave, poaching rabbits on her own account), found her master that night, she missed the customary kick and curse with which in such cases her return was greeted.

She couldn’t understand this, and consequently did not altogether like it !

Why her master should sit thinking, thinking, his head on his hands, and even his pipe forgotten, puzzled her poor faithful, loving heart ?

But she did not venture upon a remonstrance ; only lay on the ground at his feet, and stared wistfully into his face ;

looking away for fear of seeming too inquisitive for good-breeding, whenever he moved his position.

Though she was only a poor mongrel sort of dog; a mere lurcher, with all the lurcher's moral obliquity of vision, and no conscience whatever in the matter of *meum* and *tuum*; no high-bred mastiff or deerhound could have shown a fairer sense of the higher meaning of the word sympathy, than did poor Nettle that night.

At last Dick gave a deep-drawn sigh, and roused himself. As he did so he noticed Nettle's wistful eyes, and patted her head kindly, as she laid it into his hand.

"Ay, ay, old lass, it's time for you and me to be on the tramp again, for there's nothing left to keep us here any longer," he said sadly, and Nettle wagged her tail in answer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“BUT I’ll not go without seein’ her again, and tellin’ her that I’m always ready to do her biddin’, if she only lifts her little finger,” he added to himself, with sudden determination.

And so for a day or two he waited, until time and opportunity served and he managed to get Esther alone and unoccupied.

She was dreaming of happiness, dreaming of love; floating away on a pleasant sea unruffled by one troubled wave.

The afternoon had been fine for the season; and she was loitering a few minutes in the little garden, all alone in

the gloaming ; calm and full of rest. The flowers were all dead, or lying brown and ragged across the path ; the leaves had fallen from the woodbine ; and the sweet-peas she had trained so carefully round the trellis work of the tiny arbour, where her father smoked his pipe in the summer evenings, were withered and draggled.

What of that ? The flowers bloomed afresh in her life, in her heart. She leant her small head for a moment against the damp walls of the arbour she had entered, and looked into a fair future with her soft, half-closed eyes.

Suddenly she gave a little scream, and then laughed merrily.

“ I never saw you until you were standing there, Dick,” she said, quickly. “ I was thinking of—of other things, I suppose, and so you startled me ! ”

“ I didn’t think ye’d be frightened, or I’d ha’ waited till ye see’d me,” remarked

Dick apologetically; "but ye see, I've made up my mind; and I couldn't go without tellin' ye."

"Go! Where are you going, Dick?" asked the girl, with interest; for she could not fail to have a kindly feeling for the faithful fellow.

"I canna' tell that yet," and the man turned his cap slowly round and round in his hand as he considered. "Maybe one way, maybe another; but I've got to go anyway."

"Why? Have you caught all the moles in the country, or do you think you'd make more money elsewhere? Oh, Dick, Dick, I'm afraid you're a born rover, that's what it is; you cannot settle!" and Esther shook her finger at him in playful reproof.

"Ay, that's what it is," said Dick, with a sigh of relief at having an answer prompted. "Ye see, miss, I've always

been used to a wanderin' kind o' life, and it comes easier like to me than it would to most."

"Don't get into mischief then, whatever you do! I wouldn't like any harm to happen to you, Dick, for you've been a kind friend to me—kinder than most people," added the girl, dreamily.

The mole-catcher looked up gratefully.

"It's real good on ye to care what comes o' such a one as me," he said, with emotion. "I'll take care, if it's only not to vex ye."

Then he stood for a minute or two perfectly silent. How was he to say the words he had come to speak? He distrusted that slim, fair-spoken lover of hers, for all his fine speeches; but he dared not tell her *that*.

He dared not even let her know that he suspected her secret; knew that she had a lover at all.

But one thing she must be assured of, and he meant to tell her that at any rate. Dick Hepple was ready to lay down his life for her, if that could be of the slightest service.

“The time might come that ye wanted a chap like me to fight for ye, or to take yer part agen’ the rest o’ the world,” he said at last, with a great effort, and a nervousness which passed off as he spoke. “And I’d do it, so help me God, I would, though I should ha’ to come from the other end of the country! Ye’ve but to send me a scrap o’ writin’ to this place, see,” and he gave her an envelope with an address on it; “and I’ll come as fast as ever ye wish. And if there’s ever anybody that deceives ye or vexes ye at all, mind ye let me know, Miss Esther; let me know at once.”

“What do you mean?” asked the girl, rather alarmed by his vehemence.

“It’s not always them that speaks fair, means fair,” answered Dick, oracularly.

Esther’s eyes opened very wide at this. Could he know anything? At all events she didn’t like his way of speaking!

She threw the paper he had given her disdainfully on the ground.

“I shall never need *your* protection,” she said, proudly. “I have no enemies that I know of, because I never harmed a creature wilfully. But you mean it well, I dare say,” she added, softening at the sight of the man’s evident distress.

“Dinna be vexed wi’ me, Miss Esther; please dinna now, or I’ll carry a heavy heart wi’ me on the tramp! I’m not clever at saying things, maybe, and so I canna gie them the right meanin’. But there’s nothin’ I wouldn’t do for ye—nothin’ whatever!”

Esther gave him her hand in token of forgiveness, and wished him farewell.

Dick after holding it a moment carefully, wondering at its smallness and feebleness, let it fall, not venturing to press or shake it.

A moment more and he was gone.

“Poor fellow ; I wonder why he cares so much for me ?” said the girl to herself, indifferently ; and then, as she went within doors again, she relapsed at once into the reverie Dick had broken.

He was nothing to her. All his love, and admiration, and worship, were scarcely worth a thought ; certainly, not a regret. Her whole mind was absorbed by one object now, nothing else mattered.

The next morning Dick Hepple was tramping along a wet and muddy road, with Nettle at heel.

Now for the life of a vagabond, an aimless, free existence ! Sleeping under hedges and haystacks, or on a bed of brown heather under the light of the

stars, in the summer-time ; in winter, in barns among sweet-smelling hay.

For companionship he would have gipsies and tinkers ; for music, the song of birds or the gurgle of burns ; for poetry, the freshness of the earth in the early dawns, or the springing of the flowers after winter was over. But winter was before him ; and the love that had been companionship, music, poetry, and more than all these, a religion too, was withered.

Withered ! And for it poor Dick knew there would never come a spring of hope again ; that season of his life was ended, with its beauty, its joy, and its tenderness.

CHAPTER XXIV.

SOME months had passed, and the school-master's daughter sat alone in her little sitting-room. Evening had fallen, and the firelight cast long flickering gleams of light across the shadowy room ; bringing out here and there a knob or bit of carving on the quaint old cabinet ; or flashing back from the polished candlesticks, standing ready on the table.

Comfort everywhere within doors ; but Esther Grey's eyes gazed vacantly out into the darkness, the gloom of which accorded with her mood ; although, indeed, she was scarcely conscious of the scene before her.

The monthly rose-bush before the window, which had budded during a brief interval of mild weather in April, tapped against the panes with all its tiny flowers unopened, nipped by the bitter winds of May; the gaunt ash-trees, which waved their branches against a sky where a crescent moon shone faintly through light wreaths of mist; all were alike unnoted by the preoccupied girl. Suddenly the little moon was hidden by a heavy cloud. Then Esther awoke from her reverie, and turned shivering into the room. The firelight, falling now on her face, showed it drawn and pale, and her hands clasped each other convulsively.

All that day she had been strange—unlike herself. She seemed deaf to the few words her father spoke in the morning; and in school-hours had allowed the children to idle as much as they pleased at their work, while she sat motionless—

save for a trembling about the corners of her mouth at times, and a spasmodic shudder which passed over her, a shudder such as the country folks say, "tells you there's some one walking over your grave."

She seldom noticed the little ones much ; but to-day, Billy Dobson—a tiny fellow, who, too young for lessons, had been used to sit at his sister's feet while she went through her task of sewing—was startled by the pale young mistress suddenly catching him up in her arms, and kissing him passionately. He noticed with innocent wonder that her eyes were full of tears.

The other children marvelled at the scene ; marvelled at the show of feeling in one usually so calm ; and Billy looked up in her face half-frightened, and whimpered out—

"What's oo cyin' for? Billy's good. Billy doesn't cy."

“And am I not good then?” asked Esther, with an attempt at playfulness; but she put the child back on the floor, and gave him no more caresses; not though the little fellow played with the tassels of her apron, and hid his face coaxingly in the folds of her dress.

Esther Grey, turning from the darkening window, stood for a moment looking into the fire; then began pacing up and down the little room with feverish restlessness.

A sudden hasty lifting of the latch, and the girl, going to the door, faced her lover.

Her lover! Yet she gave him no greeting, no embrace; but stepped back quietly, and stood by the fire, her arm resting on the low mantel-shelf, and her eyes turned on the new-comer with a fierce intensity utterly unlike that of a girl in the presence of the man she loves.

Percy Scott took no notice of this though ; he was too full of himself and his own anxieties.

He was excited and nervous, for he had something to say of which he feared the effect on the listener.

Impatiently he waited for her to speak, so that he might lead up to the dreaded subject adroitly. But no, she had evidently no intention of breaking the silence.

At last he burst out, with the abruptness of one who has a disagreeable thing to say, and must needs get it out at once for fear it should not be said at all—

“Esther, I’m going away. Do you hear, darling? It’s only too true! My father insists on it. He’s got some inkling of the truth, I fancy, and nothing will serve him but that I must go to college for a while—that beastly agricultural college, you know.”

"What is he afraid of?" asked the girl quietly. "Does he fancy you would be such a fool as to *marry* me?"

Esther's soft young voice grew hard and bitter as she spoke, and the last words sounded like a sneer.

Perhaps Percy felt it so, for his tone grew apologetic, self-excusing.

"Esther, dear Esther, don't speak like that! You know I dare not say that I mean to do that—not yet! You know how stubborn he is; he would turn me to the door if I braved him."

"No; I know what a dutiful son you are," went on Esther, still in the same bitter way; then suddenly her eyes blazed with passion, and she turned on her lover fiercely. "What did you tell him, then? I have a right to ask that, at least!"

"Oh, hang it, Esther, you're awfully hard on a fellow to-night! What could I tell him but that there was nothing

between us ; nothing but the passing folly of a moment."

"Folly enough," groaned the girl, sinking back into the chair by the fireside, and covering her face with her hands. All at once she looked up sharply.

"Why did you come here to-night, then ? I would have been at the old place if you had sent me word. Suppose some one saw you come in and told him of it ?"

Not a thought for her own good name—for her safety even, if her father should suddenly return from Wrekenton, where he had gone to attend a political meeting ! No, all her fears were for the lover who was ashamed of her, and had, like a coward, denied her.

This even penetrated through Percy's thick coating of selfishness, and touched the little manly feeling left in him.

"Never fret about that, darling," he



said, putting his arm around her and drawing her to him. "I made sure no one was about before I came. And with such news to tell you, could I keep away, knowing you were to be alone to-night? I want to be comforted, Esther! I want you to say something hopeful and nice to help me over the separation."

Something hopeful and nice? God help her!

What could she find to say, when her whole being was permeated by an awful consciousness of coming trouble?

The lips Percy kissed were cold and unresponsive, and the young fellow felt aggrieved that his sweetheart showed no signs of sorrow. No pretty petulant pouts to be kissed off her lips; no sparkling tears such as he would fain have seen in her eyes. She seemed made of stone or marble, for any emotion there was left in her. Did she not love him so much after all, then?

“Esther, what has changed you so?” he asked, rather crossly. “If you don’t care whether I go or stay, and haven’t even a word to throw me, now that you know how short a time we can be together, why, I may as well go home, I suppose. I thought if ever a man was loved, I was, but you seem to have changed your mind now.”

Esther Grey raised her heavy eyes, and looked him in the face.

“And oh! have I not proved I loved you?” she said, in a low voice; then changing it to one of passionate sorrow, “Leave me, Percy, for mercy’s sake, leave me alone now! I am not myself to-night, and I may say something I would regret bitterly to-morrow.”

Percy could not bear the look in her face, the wail in her voice. He dreaded a scene above all things; so after a few soothing words, and a hasty caress, he not unwillingly yielded to her wish.



Percy loved the sunny side of life, the pleasant loitering in pleasant paths. He liked to be looked at and worshipped as a young divinity ; and surely his fine and graceful beauty, and his winning tongue, demanded this as a right ?

But from the sight and sound of sorrow and pain he fled at once. He might love, but his love would not stand this test.

Well for him that he could not read the mind of the girl he left standing there !

She knew instinctively that neither help nor consolation could come to her from him. She knew more, for she knew how to keep her trouble to herself, and bear it for both.

The fire grew low, and flickered no longer, and the silver little moon set behind the fir plantation ; but still Esther stood motionless.

At last, however, the barking of a dog aroused her. It heralded a coming foot-step; and, as she rose to light the candles, the door was thrown open, and her father's voice sounded angrily in her ears.

"What! No light, and the fire all but out? Have you been gadding out, girl, or asleep, that you neglect your duties like this?"

Esther answered not a word. Silently she mended the fire, and got the tired old man his supper. Then, as he sat down to enjoy his last pipe, he noticed for the first time how ill she looked.

"What's the matter, Esther, lass? You look like a ghost, and are as quiet as one. Are you not well, or has the loneliness been too much for you? Well, well, I'll not leave you so long again, poor nervous thing that you are!"

He spoke with unwonted kindness, and this all but upset Esther. With a

muttered excuse and good-night, she left the room hastily ; and once in her little bedroom did not restrain her feelings longer.

“Oh, God, let me die, let me die before he knows !” she cried ; and great sobs tore her breast, until tears came to her relief.

Worn-out nature succumbing at last to fatigue, she fell asleep ; only to dream that she was dead, and that little Billy was an angel sent to take her to heaven, but that she could not fly into the air with him, try as she might ; and so, although he cried very much, he was obliged to leave her on the cold dreary earth alone.

END OF VOL. I.





